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# Redemption or Condemnation? A Long-Term Follow-up of the Desistance Patterns of Sex Offenders

Kimberly Raye Kras

*University of Missouri-St. Louis*, [krk550@mail.umsl.edu](mailto:krk550@mail.umsl.edu)

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**Redemption or Condemnation? A Long-Term Follow-up of the Desistance Patterns of  
Sex Offenders**

Kimberly R. Kras

M.S., Criminal Justice and Criminology, University of Missouri-Kansas City – 2005

B.A., Psychology, University of Missouri-Kansas City – 2003

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**COMMITTEE MEMBERS**

Beth M. Huebner, Ph.D. (Chairperson)

Lee Slocum, Ph.D.

Stephanie DiPietro, Ph.D.

Shadd Maruna, Ph.D.

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## **ABSTRACT**

Desistance is one of most important topics in criminology. Why some offenders stop offending and why others continue has been long been a question with far-reaching theoretical and empirical implications. Despite the extensive literature on desistance, most of the research examines offenders as a single group, an approach which might overlook differences between individuals by offense type. One offender group that has not been investigated in depth is sex offenders. Sex offenders are an important group to study because they present concerns to public safety and are the subject of much legislation and criminal justice policy. A substantial amount of research has been devoted to understanding why sex offenders commit the crimes they do and recidivism. However, fewer studies have examined about *how* and *why* they might desist from offending.

There are reasons to expect that the desistance process may operate differently for sex offenders as compared to other types of offenders. The public considers sex offenders to be among the most dangerous offenders, who reoffend at very high rates, which has resulted in legislation that increases surveillance and restrictions intended to prevent future offending. Despite a widespread belief that sex offenders are not amenable to rehabilitation, most states require sex offenders to participate in treatment that addresses sexual deviance using cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT). The differences between sex offenders and other types of offenders suggests that the path to desistance for sex offenders might also occur differently than for other types of offenders who are not subject to the same public scrutiny, legal restrictions, and therapeutic interventions.

To examine the nature of the desistance process for sex offenders, this dissertation uses a longitudinal qualitative analysis of current and former sex offenders at two points in time: release from prison (*Phase 1*) and a three-year follow-up (*Phase 2*). Findings show that

patterns of desistance are more complex than the desister-persister dichotomy suggests. This study explores the relationship of cognitive scripts to these categories, discusses the influence of treatment on desistance, and presents additional cognitive scripts specific to the reentry experience of sex offenders. Implications of this research are also discussed.

## **DISCLAIMER**

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## **CHAPTER 1: THE DESISTANCE PROCESS FOR SEX OFFENDERS**

“It would appear that it is no longer the sex offender’s crimes that are that are unacceptable, but the sex offenders themselves.” -*Kirsty Hudson (2005)*

Sex offenders have received increased attention from the public and criminal justice system in the last several decades. Sex offenders now comprise between 10% and 30% of state prison populations (Harrison and Beck, 2006). Of these offenders, approximately 40% are convicted of rape and 60% are convicted of assaults against children, including child molestation, statutory rape and statutory sodomy (Harrison and Beck, 2006). The number of convicted and incarcerated sex offenders increased 300% between 1980 and 1994, primarily due to the heightened penalties for all sex offenses (Greenfield, 1997). Sex offenders also serve almost twice as much prison time for their offenses as other offenders, which arguably increases their risk for re-entry challenges because of the extended length of time away from the community (Center for Sex Offender Management, 2007). The most recent scholarship and policy analysis has focused on management and punishment of sex offenders (Garland, 2001; Simon, 1998), but less work has focused on reentry and desistance for sex offenders.

Despite the breadth of desistance research, little is known about how or why sex offenders stop offending. Compared to other offenders, sex offenders commit crimes that are considered most egregious by the public (Matravers, 2003; Sample and Bray, 2003; Schiavone and Jeglic, 2009). More specifically, the emphasis on crimes against children suggests a homogenized view by the public of sex offending behavior (Matravers, 2003). Criminal psychologist Helen Gavin writes “The dominant narrative construction, in Western societies, concerning child sex offenders, identifies such individuals as purely male, inherently evil, inhuman, beyond redemption or cure, lower class, and unknown to the victim

(who is constructed as female)” (as quoted in Waldram, 2009:220; see also Kernsmith, Comartin, Craun, and Kernsmith, 2009). Sex offenders are seen as “modern day folk devils” that are different from others in society as their behavior is a manifestation of immoral pathology (Burrell, 2000; Collins and Nee, 2010; Langevin, 1991; Quinsey, 2003; Willis, Levenson, and Ward, 2010). The overarching nature of this stereotype creates unique obstacles for offenders in this group when they shift from a criminal to a non-criminal identity. Some of these obstacles include social exclusion, stigma, and their own deviant sexual cognitions.

One reason the public holds such negative views toward sex offenders is the belief that they reoffend at high rates (Hudson, 2005; Levenson and Cotter, 2005; Meloy, Miller, and Curtis, 2008; Sample and Bray, 2003; Schiavone and Jeglic, 2009; Thomas, 2003). However, research demonstrates that sex offenders have lower rates of official recidivism than other offender types (Bynum, 2001; Hanson and Bussiere, 1998; Hanson and Morton-Bourgon, 2005; Piquero, Farrington, Jennings, Diamond, and Craig, 2012; Sample and Bray, 2003; Zevitz, 2006). The base rate for sexual reoffending ranges from 3% to 32% depending on various factors, such as level of sexual deviance, whether treatment was completed, and type of sex offense committed (Bynum, 2001). Despite this wide range, the recidivism rate for sex offenses is substantially lower than the recidivism rate for other types of offenses (Alexander, 1999; Hanson and Bussiere, 1998). Recidivism rates are higher for robbery (70%), burglary (74%) and assault (65%; Langan and Levin, 2002). Sample and Bray (2003) suggest that the low recidivism rates for sex offenders is evidence that the base rate is likely accurate in light of their high visibility in the community.

The distinction made by the criminal justice system between sex offenders and other types of offenders has created a “criminal apartheid” that contributes to the creation of specific state laws and policies regarding sex offender sentencing, supervision, and re-entry processes (Hudson, 2005; Soothill, Francis and Ackerly, 1998). Over the past three decades, there have been numerous legislative efforts to address the issue of sexual offending and recidivism. In 1994, the Jacob Wetterling Crimes Against Children and Sexually Violent Offender Registration Act mandated that states establish community notification procedures and registries related to sex offenders. In 1996, the enactment of Megan’s Law allowed states to expand registries and make them publicly available (Thomas, 2003). The Adam Walsh Act (2006) mandated the creation of a national database for sex offenders and a tiered classification system known as SORNA.<sup>1</sup>

Simon (1998) suggests the rise in sex offender-specific legislation is a function of a new penology where individuals are not the focus; instead risk management and public safety are emphasized. Sex offender laws and restrictions at the local, state, and federal levels have grown increasingly punitive (Bottoms, 1995; Cohen and Jeglic, 2007; Edwards and Hensley, 2001; LaFond and Winick, 1998; Petrunik, 2002; Robbers, 2009). Mandatory sentences, civil commitment, community notification, monitoring, and supervision are results of popular punitivism (Cohen and Jeglic, 2007; Garland, 2001; Presser and Gunnison, 1999; Simon, 1998). Specific examples of these legal and extralegal sanctions include registering with local law enforcement, abiding by housing restrictions (such as boundaries of schools, parks or daycares), and restrictions from residing with minors. Additional restrictions might include mandatory polygraph examinations, monitored internet usage and social networking,

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<sup>1</sup> Sex Offender Registration and Notification Act. In addition to this federal legislation, in Missouri *Revised Missouri Statutes 589.400 to 589.425* govern the sex offender restrictions.

and restrictions for attending church, and working in jobs where sex offenders may come into contact with children.

Some scholars suggest the legislative response to sex offenders is a result of well-publicized, extreme crimes, and does not reflect the actual characteristics of sex offending (Meloy, Curtis, and Boatwright, 2013; Levenson and Cotter, 2005; Soothill, 2010). Though popular, legislative policies have not shown to be efficacious in enhancing safety or reducing sexual offending (Duwe, Donnay, and Tewksbury, 2008; Huebner, Kras, Rydberg, Bynum, Grommon, and Pleggenkuhle, 2014; Levenson, 2003; Levenson and Cotter, 2005; Socia, 2012; Tewksbury, 2005; Tewksbury and Humkey, 2010; Tewksbury and Jennings, 2010; Ragusa-Salerno and Zgoba, 2012). In a study evaluating the efficacy of residency restrictions in Michigan and Missouri, Huebner and colleagues (2014) found no significant differences in sexual recidivism pre- and post-boundary implementation. Regardless, a recent study of lawmakers' opinions shows a high degree of agreement that the legislation has been problematic, but that it is necessary to combat sexual offending (Meloy et al., 2013). In this study, 65% of lawmakers felt the laws were a deterrent from sex offending, and despite treatment mandates fewer than half (49%) felt it was effective (Meloy et al., 2013).

These laws have been associated with additional negative consequences for sex offenders upon return to the community (Hudson, 2005; Jeglic, Mercado, and Levenson, 2012; Levenson, 2003; Levenson, 2008; Levenson and Cotter, 2005; Robbers, 2009; Tewksbury, 2005; Tewksbury and Humkey, 2010; Tewksbury and Lees, 2006). In a study of 135 child molesters in Florida (one of the most restrictive states), Levenson and Cotter (2005) found that due to residency and registration requirements, offenders felt isolated, incurred financial hardships, and faced new responsibilities, like attending treatment. Sex

offenders disproportionately live in disadvantaged areas because these locations are more likely to be within residency guidelines (Hughes and Burchfield, 2008; Mustaine, Tewksbury, and Stengel, 2006). Sex offenders also report other types of destabilization. Their status as sex offenders may lead to difficulty obtaining or maintaining employment and/or job stress, contributing to lower levels of self-esteem, and ultimately recidivism (Schaefer, Friedlander, Blustein, and Maruna, 2004). In interviews, sex offenders who were in treatment and employed described experiencing shame, depression, anxiety, trouble sleeping, disrupted communication, and distorted thinking due to their restrictions as sex offenders (Schaefer et al. 2004).

Many policymakers and members of the public feel that sex offenders require treatment, but are paradoxically “untreatable” (Meloy et al., 2013; Sample and Kadleck, 2008). Some states have enacted legislation requiring sex offenders to participate in treatment both in prison and in the community. This treatment most often follows a cognitive behavioral model (Abel, Becker, Cunningham-Rathner, Rouleau, Kaplan, and Reich, 1984; Laws and Ward, 2011). Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) emphasizes the restructuring of cognitions that are supportive of deviant behavior. CBT has been deemed appropriate for sex offenders as cognitive distortions, such as denial of harm, have been linked with sexual offending behavior (Bumby and Hanson, 1997). While much research supports the efficacy of CBT programs in reducing sex offender recidivism (Hanson and Bussiere, 1998), how CBT impacts long-term desistance and identity transformation remains unexplored.

Much of the scholarship on desistance is grounded in the life course paradigm. One of the primary theories explaining this process is cognitive transformation, which emphasizes the importance of changing one’s thinking patterns to adopt a non-criminal identity. Laws

and Ward (2011), in *Desistance from Sex Offending*, theorize that non-criminal scripts are linked with the emergence of new identities in sex offenders. These scripts have not yet been investigated with a sample of sex offenders. The current study sample presents a unique opportunity to explore the influences of mandated CBT on the transformation process of one of society's most stigmatized groups. The opinion that sex offenders cannot be treated leads people to believe they are also not deserving of a second chance, or "redeemable" (Maruna and King, 2009). This study seeks to apply concepts related to cognitive transformation and redemption to sex offenders and revise those concepts.

To date, little research has explored desistance with samples of sex offenders. This is primarily due to the use of clinical samples in sex offender recidivism studies (Lussier and Blokland, 2013). Recent efforts have attempted to explore age of onset, frequency, prevalence, and desistance, but these studies are in their infancy (Cale, Leclerc, and Smallbone, 2014; Laws and Ward, 2011; Lussier, 2005; Lussier and Blokland, 2013; Lussier and Gress, 2013; Lussier and Healey, 2009; Lussier and Mathesius, 2012; Lussier, Leclerc, Cale, and Proulx, 2007a; Lussier, Proulx, and LeBlanc, 2005b; Lussier, Van den Berg, Bijleveld, and Hendriks, 2012; Mathesius and Lussier, 2013; Ward and Beech, 2006). Despite this surge in research, there is a dearth of qualitative studies of desistance with sex offenders. How the desistance process might operate for this type of offender, who is subject to specific legal and social circumstances once convicted, has great import for further evaluation of existing policies, as well as the creation of more effective ones in the future. Further, how these specific laws and restrictions affect the quality of life, which has been described by previous researchers as influencing desistance from offending (see Robbers, 2009), is also important.



## ***OVERVIEW OF THE STUDY***

The goal of this dissertation is to explore the nature and process of desistance for sex offenders. Using a longitudinal, qualitative study design, this research examines the lives of sex offenders over time and in the contexts of the specific challenges they face. This study examines desistance within the context of exposure to CBT and other therapies that are often employed with sex offenders. CBT may have unique effects on the ways in which sex offenders transform their identities via cognitive scripts, as well as influencing patterns of desistance.

The dissertation examines the importance of developmental factors related to desistance, specifically cognition, identity transformation, labeling, and stigma. To do so, in-depth qualitative interviews conducted at two different points in time are used: an initial interview from 2010 at the time of release from prison (*Phase 1*) and a three-year follow-up interview from 2013 (*Phase 2*). Qualitative analysis will explore the validity of the concepts outlined by the identity transformation theories that are described in Chapter 2, and I present new themes regarding the desistance and identity transformation process.

The dissertation proceeds as follows. The second chapter discusses the prevailing theoretical orientations and relevant literature regarding desistance. Throughout, I discuss how the concepts in these studies may be applied to sex offenders. A presentation of cognitive behavioral interventions used with sex offenders follows to better frame their potential impacts on the desistance process. Chapter 3 presents the data, methodology, sample characteristics and desistance patterns identified in the sample. Also, I operationalize desistance, define theoretical concepts used in the analysis, and discuss the analytic procedures. Chapter 4 presents results of a modified grounded theory analysis and extension

of redemption and condemnation scripts of sex offenders as related to their desistance patterns. Chapter 5 describes the meanings sex offenders associate with rehabilitation and how those are related to their perceived risk of reoffending. In Chapter 6, I present cognitive scripts unique to sex offenders' identity transformation processes and describe how these scripts are reflected in their goals for the future. The dissertation concludes with a chapter describing the policy implications of these findings and suggestions for future research and theoretical development.

## **CHAPTER 2: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS AND LITERATURE REVIEW**

This chapter presents theoretical frameworks that may help understand sex offenders' desistance processes. As described in the introduction, the life course paradigm is a theoretical foundation just recently used to understand sex offender desistance (see Laws and Ward, 2011). Much of this research has examined ontogenetic aspects of desistance, such as age of onset, frequency and prevalence, and criminal careers (see Lussier and Cale, 2013). Sociogenic aspects, including cognitive transformation, agency, labeling and stigma, and social structure have not been applied to sex offenders as often. The current study evaluates sex offender desistance by incorporating these theoretical concepts.

It is also important to examine the theoretical underpinnings of treatment for sex offenders as part of the desistance process. As much of this literature relies on cognitive behavioral theories, it is essential to consider the role treatment plays in identity transformation. Scholars suggest that cognitive behavioral approaches are situated within the desistance paradigm (McNeill, 2006) and provide a strong framework for exploring how cognitive transformation and treatment impact the desistance process.

The first section of this chapter describes the life course paradigm, emphasizing the developmental perspective. The second discusses theoretical orientations related to cognitive and identity transformation, including Giordano and colleagues' (2002) theory of cognitive transformation and Maruna's (2001) *Making Good* framework. The role of symbolic interactionism and the "looking-glass self" are explored here. Then, the impacts of labeling, stigma and shame on sex offenders are discussed. Throughout the literature review, the relevant sex offender research is used to further develop desistance concepts in the context of the present study. Following the discussion of theoretical orientations, literature regarding

cognitive restructuring and the implementation of CBT for sex offenders is discussed.

Because the majority of sex offenders are required to complete treatment while in prison and undergo aftercare in the community upon release, it is important to explore how the desistance process can be refined for sex offenders.

### ***THE LIFE COURSE PARADIGM***

Several large-scale contributions have guided the field in how desistance is theorized, discussed, and studied (Giordano, Cernkovich, and Rudolph, 2002; Glueck and Glueck, 1951; Laub and Sampson, 2003; Maruna, 2001; Paternoster and Bushway, 2009; Sampson and Laub, 1990; Serin and Lloyd, 2009; Uggen and Kruttschnitt, 1998). These studies have also been interdisciplinary, overlapping with the field of psychology, sociology, social psychology, and biology. The value in integrating theories from other academic fields is that the overlap might provide a more comprehensive picture for desistance frameworks and guide more precise conceptualization (Maruna, 2001). Previously, sex offenders had been under the purview of psychology and had been studied clinically, but recently desistance concepts have been specifically applied to sex offenders (Laws and Ward, 2011).

### **DEFINING DESISTANCE**

Scholars have encountered numerous challenges in defining desistance, and there is no agreed upon operationalization of the term (Kazemian, 2007). Despite these challenges, desistance is most often examined as either a termination event or a process. Early definitions describe desistance as the point in time at which one stops offending (Farrall and Bowling, 1999; Shover, 1996). More recent definitions consider desistance as a process rather than a single event (Bushway, Piquero, Broidy, Cauffman, and Mazerolle, 2001; Kazemian, 2007; Laub and Sampson, 2003; Laws and Ward, 2011; Loeber and LeBlanc, 1990; Maruna, 2001;

Paternoster and Bushway, 2009). For example, Bushway and colleagues (2001) suggest that desistance is a change in criminality that is systematic and influenced by time-varying, social, biological and psychological factors. Maruna (2001) refers to desistance as a maintenance process, one that is ongoing and consists of those efforts at attaining long-term abstinence from crime. Most studies utilize official records to measure desistance; however some include more qualitative measures of behavioral desistance to capture unofficial conduct related to deviance (see Kazemian, 2007). It is expected that for sex offenders, measures of behavioral desistance are required as indicators of “failure,” such as viewing of pornography or lack of progress in treatment (English, 1998). These behavioral patterns may signal the potential for reoffending, but are not often included in official measures of recidivism. Identifying these risky behaviors is of great importance to public safety, especially when many sex offenses are unreported or undetected.

#### **ONTOGENETIC VERSUS SOCIOGENIC MODELS**

Initial conceptualizations of desistance from crime relied on ontogenetic models, which emphasize maturational processes, like aging, as primary factors in desistance (Gottfredson and Hirschi, 1990; Gove, 1985; Levinson, 1986). One of the principal works supporting this model is the Gluecks’ study, *Unraveling Juvenile Delinquency* (1950). This longitudinal study of adolescent boys during the Great Depression concluded that desistance occurred as part of the aging process. Even though most individuals eventually “aged out” of crime, delinquent boys were more likely to become adult criminals than those who had not engaged in delinquency. These findings contribute to what is labeled in criminology as the age-crime curve. Many subsequent criminological studies have also demonstrated that age is one of the most consistent factors related to crime trends over the life course (Farrington,

1986; Gottfredson and Hirschi, 1990; Hirschi and Gottfredson, 1983; Tittle, 1988). For example, Blumstein and Cohen (1987) found that by age 28 most offenders are no longer involved in crime. Recent longitudinal research confirms that even the most serious juvenile offenders cease offending when they reach adulthood (Mulvey, 2011).

Much of the research investigating ontogenetic factors for sex offenders has focused on criminal careers. Studies have examined juvenile sex offending into adulthood (Lussier and Blokland, 2013; Lussier and Healey, 2009; Piquero et al., 2012; Zimring, Piquero and Jennings, 2007; Zimring, Jennings, Piquero, and Hays, 2009) and the age of onset versus age of conviction (Mathesius and Lussier, 2012; Smallbone and Wortley, 2004). Adult onset of sexual offending is more common than juvenile onset (Lussier and Cale, 2013). In Smallbone and Wortley's (2004) study, the mean age of conviction for an offense against a child was 37 years, but the mean self-reported age of onset of sexual offending was 32, suggesting that some sexual offenders commit crimes prior to their official recording. Later onset of sexual offending might signify greater detection avoidance abilities, and might suggest that offenders' real onset is actually much earlier (Lussier and Mathesius, 2012).

Further, most juvenile sex offenders do not go on to become adult sex offenders (Lussier and Cale, 2013), but there is some evidence they go on to be adult general offenders (Piquero et al., 2012; Zimring et al., 2009). Other investigations of the criminal careers of adolescent sex offenders show that they commit a variety of crimes and do not specialize (Carpentier, Leclerc, and Proulx, 2011; Lussier and Blokland, 2013; Lussier, Leclerc, Healey, and Proulx, 2007b; Nisbet, Wilson, and Smallbone, 2004; Zimring et al., 2009). One meta-analysis shows sex offenders were more likely to reoffend in other ways, like violent or property offending (36.2%), than sexually (13.7%), suggesting the risk for any type of

recidivism for sex offenders is important, although it is lower than for other types of offenders (Hanson and Morton-Bourgon, 2005). Studies demonstrate that sex offenders are criminally versatile and are more persistent in general offending than in sexual offending (Lussier and Cale, 2013; Soothill, Francis, Sanderson, and Ackerley, 2000). In all, the evidence thus far suggests that many sexual offenders may be life course persistent offenders, but maybe not life course persistent *sexual offenders* (Reingle, 2012).

Despite age and prior criminal history being the most common and consistent predictors of future offending, critics suggest the ontogenetic perspective fails to consider human agency, developmental processes and environmental influences, which is termed the “ontogenetic fallacy” (see Dannefer, 1984). In contrast to ontogenetic orientations, sociogenic perspectives account for the developmental and environmental factors related to desistance (Baltes and Nesselroade, 1984; Dannefer, 1984; Farrall and Bowling, 1995; Laub and Sampson, 1995; LeBlanc and Loeber, 1998). From these perspectives, maturation processes into and out of crimes are still important, but only if contextualized historically and environmentally (Dannefer, 1984; Laub and Sampson, 2001; Laub and Sampson, 2003). One’s environment, social structure, human interactions, psychological predispositions, agency, and various developmental stages across the life course influence whether or not one engages in crime (Copes, Hochstetler, and Williams, 2008; Farrall and Bowling, 1999; Giordano et al., 2002; Laub and Sampson, 2001; Maruna, 2001; Paternoster and Bushway, 2009). Serin and Lloyd (2009) believe underlying psychological characteristics of an individual are stable traits (i.e. personality); however they claim it is possible that desistance is more closely related to more dynamic structures of the psyche, like emotions or mood. Laub and Sampson (2001:41) suggest one of the greatest challenges to understanding

desistance is that there is “no way to disentangle the role of subjective vs. objective change as the cause of desistance.” Subjective change refers to the internal sources of transformation, while objective change refers to external influences. In the study of sex offenders, these elements of change may be even more challenging to decouple, considering the cognitive and structural boundaries they encounter.

One of the primary desistance theories accounting for both individual and structural factors is Laub and Sampson’s (2003; Sampson and Laub, 1993) theory of age-graded informal social control. Their longitudinal analysis of the Gluecks’ (1950) data with adolescent boys provides a unique opportunity to examine numerous desistance concepts. Their findings suggested that various forms of both formal and informal social control occurring over the life course, namely employment and marriage, provide offenders with “turning points” needed to transition out of lives of crime. Changes in relationships and opportunities for social capital vary and are age-graded. Social capital consists of resources one derives through the strength of social ties with institutions, like family networks and employment (Coleman, 1988; Sampson and Laub, 1993). Laub and Sampson (2003) describe the lifestyles of persistent offenders as “chaotic,” characterized by unstable living arrangements, unsteady employment, and lack of relationships with significant others. In contrast, those who desisted from crime were more likely to be employed and more likely to be married. Not only was it important for desisters to have formal and informal mechanisms of social control, but the quality of bonds was also crucial to their influence.

Sampson and Laub (1993) argue that bonds, or attachments, between the individual and society will provide the social control necessary to inhibit offending behavior for general offenders. However, the process might occur differently for the sex offender who, in some



ways, is denied access to conventional social bonds, like family and intimate partner relationships or employment, because of legal restrictions. If sex offenders are denied access to conventional bonds, achievement of goals might also be limited. Social capital can also be difficult to build if people are reluctant to invest in sex offenders, through general support, employment, or housing for example. In one study, sex offenders reported having limited social capital and few friends, and admitted to avoiding relationships to minimize the stigma and shame associated with disclosing their offense (Burchfield and Mingus, 2008). The potential limits of sex offenders' social bonds make it more difficult to reintegrate and gain social capital, and may ultimately increase their risk of reoffending.

Weak social bonds are also related to sexual recidivism. Negative environments, like abuse or family dysfunction, magnify deficits in social skills and encourage rumination on sexually deviant thoughts and feelings that are associated with increases in sexual recidivism (Duwe et al. 2008; Hanson and Harris, 2000; Hanson and Morton-Bourgon, 2005; Lussier et al., 2005). In fact, weak attachments to others, along with such things as empathy deficits, are thought to facilitate sex offending, and it may be that sexual offending is associated with a "chronic, antisocial lifestyle" (Lussier et al., 2005: 271). In contrast, sex offenders who had stable employment histories and were in court-ordered treatment showed less likelihood of recidivism (Hanson and Harris, 2000; Kruttschnitt, Uggen, and Shelton, 2000).

Employment and treatment are thought to be turning points for some offenders. Turning points are ways in which to "knife off" from the past and live a crime free life (Laub and Sampson, 2003). Reinventing themselves, offenders start over by cutting themselves off from things in their past, a common strategy for criminal offenders (Maruna, Lebel, Naples, and Mitchell, 2009; Maruna and Roy, 2007). However, knifing off can also lead to being

excluded from prosocial opportunities. Some criminal sanctions exclude individuals from opportunities that may assist in their reentry (see Maruna and Roy, 2007). This structural knifing off is particularly relevant for sex offenders whose opportunities for housing and employment, due to the laws, are altered in ways other offenders may not experience. For example, the sex offender registry is a structural way of potentially knifing off prosocial connections, because individuals will be more easily identified and potentially stigmatized (Maruna and Roy, 2007). Similarly, residency restrictions may preclude an offender from living with a prosocial family member. Maruna and Roy (2007: 114) highlight this isolation:

If an individual's ties with the past are severed, this may mean also cutting ties with his or her family of origin, or even his or her own children. As such the knifed off individual might suffer from loneliness or a sense of isolation, especially if his or her new world does not offer suitable replacements for all previous attachments.

#### **AGENCY**

Some desistance research is criticized for failing to consider human choice and decision making. To address this limitation, scholars suggest that examining the shifts in self-narratives can help uncover the important elements of agency in the desistance process (Giordano et al., 2002; Giordano, Schroder and Cernkovich, 2007; Laub and Sampson, 2003; Laws and Ward, 2011; Maruna, 2001). For example, the opportunity to desist from crime must present itself to the offender, who must recognize and value it (Giordano et al., 2007; Rungay, 2004; Serin and Lloyd, 2009). Even when exposed to similar circumstances, individuals will experience, react, and internalize opportunities differently, resulting in considerable variation in responses (Caspi and Moffitt, 1995).

Scholars also suggest that agency is better understood in the context of the structural conditions in which the individual exists (Bottoms, 2006; Bottoms, Shapland, Costello, Holmes, and Muir, 2004). Structure consists of components of the social world such as

marriage and employment, but also those opportunities or restrictions that influence one's choices and decision-making (Giordano et al., 2002; Laub and Sampson, 2003; Lebel et al., 2008). Giordano and colleagues (2002: 1004) suggest that people "make moves, but they do so within bounded territory, and a specific nexus of opportunities and constraints." This point is key for examining how agency affects desistance for sex offenders, since the structure within which they live changes dramatically after they are punished. Following a sex offense conviction, offenders have more limited options than previously to exert the agency that influences their opportunities. For example, sex offenders are prohibited from living within a certain distance of schools, which in most urban locations limits available residences. Structurally, the limitation of the offenders' choice on where and with whom they can live, limits prosocial alternatives that are linked with law-abiding behavior (Mingus and Burchfield, 2012). These prosocial environments may contain other structural influences, like relationships with children or a spouse, but must be managed in the context of abiding by the restrictions and laws.

In response to this structural dilemma related to agency, King (2013: 318) states that "The central challenge for would-be desisters, therefore, is to develop the necessary strategies that will assist them in developing their personal and social contexts in ways that will enable them to move away from crime and (re)integrate into mainstream society." Sex offender treatment assists with developing strategies to reduce reoffending, but it does not necessarily assist with developing the skills to successfully reintegrate into the community. As treatment is focused on changing cognitions that support deviance to ones that are more normative, the function of agency emphasizes managing one's risk rather than producing an alternative, and conventional, lifestyle. However, treatment ingrains the idea that that the

choices one makes to reoffend or not are one's own, and simultaneously promotes agency through the philosophy that the sex offender is a "good person who made a bad choice" (Morin and Levenson, 2002). The cognitive dissonance between agency over risk and agency over goodness is important to reconcile. Sex offenders have little to no control over their environments and therefore limited capacity to exact fully "agentic moves" (Giordano et al., 2002). If an environment, such as a dysfunctional household, does not support prosocial change, then it may interfere with the offender's cognitive work toward desistance. King (2013: 329) finds that "when would-be desisters encounter institutional uncertainty or structural barriers they may tend to revert to the iterational orientation of agency, which underpins routine or habitual action." That is, in the face of additional challenges, sex offenders might revert back to the antisocial coping mechanisms that have contributed to their offending cycle (Rumgay, 2004). Sex offender desistance studies have not yet addressed the issue of agency, and the current research considers the options sex offenders have after their conviction due to laws and restrictions, and how they perceive and respond to them.

### ***DESISTANCE THROUGH IDENTITY TRANSFORMATION***

In addition to explanations focusing on age-graded developmental stages across the life course, the desistance literature has also emphasized shifts in internal characteristics like cognition, identity and self-concept as important mechanisms for desistance (Giordano et al., 2002; Kazemian and Maruna, 2009; Maruna, 2001; Paternoster and Bushway, 2009; Vaughan, 2007). The concept of cognitive shift, or a change in one's thinking patterns, is important in the present day because individuals may be more deeply embedded in criminal lifestyles and may be more fully removed from avenues that present respectable alternatives to crime. Furthermore, society has changed in ways that provide less guidance about

conventional norms (Giordano et al., 2002; Farrall and Sparks, 2006). In regard to cognitions, Rungay (2004: 405) states:

For an opportunity for desistance to be seized, it must not only present itself to the offender, but also be both recognised and valued as such. It is suggested that successful desistance from crime may be rooted in recognition of an opportunity to claim an alternative, desired and socially approved personal identity.

The emphasis on thinking patterns in the criminal justice system puts the onus of reform on the offender. This is important to consider, especially in context of recent legislation and policies that emphasize sex offenders' cognitive control over their deviance. Not only does the offender have to firstly be cognizant of the opportunity to desist, secondly the opportunity must be available (Giordano et al., 2002; Rungay, 2004). It is possible sex offenders have the capacity to meet the first task, but are more disadvantaged in the second. That is, opportunities for identity transformation may be less available to sex offenders.

### **SYMBOLIC INTERACTIONISM**

Identity transformation can be understood through symbolic interactionist perspectives, which emphasize the importance of how one's own view is shaped by others'. Symbolic interactionism is a framework that incorporates the social nature of cognition and how people interact with each other (Mead, 1934). An important aspect of the symbolic interactionist approach is the "looking glass self" (Cooley, 1902). The looking glass self allows people to evaluate themselves through perceptions of how others see them (Cooley, 1902; Tice, 1992). Desistance might be most likely when the offender perceives and reflects society's acceptance, and this can influence prosocial change (Makkai and Braithwaite, 1994; Maruna, 2004). Offenders might better reform when others around them believe they can (Maruna et al. 2009). The symbolic interactionist tradition is interested in the role of the social world in shaping interactions with others, especially conventional norms. In order to

be rehabilitated or reintegrated, offenders must accept conventional society, but society must also accept them in return (Maruna et al., 2004). However, the looking glass may not reflect the same cognitions sex offenders possess about their identities. The sex offender's looking glass reflection is highly stigmatized, thereby creating a one-sided process in identity transformation (Scully, 1988; Shott, 1979).

Giordano and colleagues (2002) present a symbolic interactionist interpretation of the desistance process. In their theory of cognitive transformation, cognition and “agentic moves” are central to individual change. Their theory also highlights a “reciprocal relationship between actor and environment and reserve[s] a central place for agency in the change process” (Giordano et al., 2002: 999). Cognitive shifts are the essential mechanisms by which this change occurs. These shifts must resonate with the individuals, and they must choose to move forward with them. In order to transform, one must: 1) be open change, 2) see greater opportunity in the environment, known as “hooks for change,” 3) envision a new self that is incompatible with the criminal self, called a “replacement self,” and 4) see oneself in this new way and no longer see deviance and crime as a viable lifestyle. Giordano et al. (2002) focus on the individual's readiness for change along with normative orientations of partners and other social supports. Conventional ties improve the chances of confirming the new identity, allowing the offender to feel a sense of belonging to society and to develop an attachment to conventional norms (Berg and Huebner, 2011; Maruna, 2001; Giordano et al., 2002).

#### **COGNITIVE SCRIPTS: CONDEMNATION AND REDEMPTION**

Another way of examining the role of cognitions in the desistance process for offenders is through self-narratives, which are stories individuals create to derive meaning

from their lives (McAdams, 2006). It is through a meaningful, or generative, narrative that reinforces the idea that desistance from crime can occur. In Maruna's (2001) *Making Good: How Ex-Convicts Reform and Rebuild Their Lives*, he discusses how offenders rely on these cognitive scripts to assist in their identity transformation. He interviewed individuals he considered persisters and desisters—crime free for three years—from the Liverpool Desistance Study to examine cognitive adaptations that supported either outcome. Maruna (2001) identified these cognitive adaptations as condemnation or redemption scripts. He found that those who desisted from crime made statements about salvaging a “good” self from a bad past and integrating themselves into a productive niche for the future. Desisters conveyed a sense of control over their lives and had a mission to redeem themselves. As such, they reframed their criminal behavior not as a shameful past, but rather as life experiences which led to their transformation. Desisters positioned themselves in their stories as people who are constantly struggling with remaining crime free and rewrite their stories to align with those of conventional people (Maruna, 2001). Offenders who desisted were optimistic and positive about their chances and the amount of control they had in their lives.

In contrast, persisters characterized their ongoing criminal behavior as part of being “doomed to deviance” (Maruna, 2001). Persisters felt powerless to change their behaviors or environments. The lack of agency led to continued substance abuse, deviant behavior and criminal acts. This script also had implications about self-efficacy, where offenders felt a lack of control or ability to be successful by conventional standards. Persisters felt they continued crime because that was the unavoidable circumstance of their life. Compared to desisters, there was no hope for reform.

Maruna (2001) says the new scripts that offenders create take considerable time and effort to master. Maruna (2004) and Rungay (2004) note that offenders may not have enough practice or efficacy in their new scripts to apply them effectively in various situations. These situations are often everyday displays of conventional and moral behavior. Sex offenders might receive conflicting information about which displays they are permitted to participate in, such as attending church or parenting their own children. Other everyday activities might be made difficult by their own cognitive dissonance between their offense and their identity. Cognitive dissonance occurs when there are discrepancies in one's cognitions about the self and the views of others (Cantwell and Martiny, 2010; Cromwell and Birzer, 2012; Festinger, 1957; Higgins, 1987; King, 2013). Difficulty reconciling conflicting self-views may cause distress (Higgins, 1987). In criminology, cognitive dissonance is consistent with techniques of neutralization (Sykes and Matza, 1957), where offenders and ex-offenders will try to reconcile the differences between their beliefs about right and wrong by neutralizing and justifying their criminal behavior (Cromwell and Birzer, 2012; Kear-Colwell and Pollock, 1997). For example, child molesters may experience dissonance between their belief that they love children and the actual harm to the victims (Tierney and McCabe, 2001). Extending the concept beyond conviction, cognitive dissonance may play a role in the identity management strategies employed by sex offenders. The possible dissonance between who offenders believe they are and how society perceives them may affect offenders' abilities to reform and fully construct redemptive narratives.

Maruna (2001) has acknowledged that, in addition to cognitive adaptations, the role of structural disadvantage is important to identity transformation. Rungay (2004: 409) stated, "For the reforming offender, global identities provide 'skeleton' scripts, which



generally encompass only a fraction of situations and interactions in which the role must be performed and which may be highly idealized versions of ‘messy, real world’ mundanity.” Offenders with poor life experiences, related to family, employment, school, and/or crime, may not have had enough opportunities or practice in the “mundane” aspects of routines linked with desistance (Rumgay, 2004). For sex offenders, some of these routines may be limited due to restrictions, such as being prohibited from attending church or family functions where children are present. Therefore, offenders may be provided an ideal set of scripts by which to live that does not reflect their actual experiences.

Although not studied in depth in the criminological literature, shifts in cognitive scripts have been documented with sex offenders. In interviews with 38 imprisoned sex offenders in Israel, Elisha and colleagues (2012) found that offenders experienced negative labeling, social exclusion and rejection due to the nature of their offenses. In order to overcome these obstacles, offenders relied on forms of social support, such as spousal and family acceptance, and tools for internal transformation such as spirituality and self-acceptance (Elisha et al., 2012). In terms of self-acceptance, they learned to love themselves in a new way through compassion and forgiveness and recognized their internal struggles with negativity and rejection. Offenders expressed hope, optimism and a desire to live quality lives. This narrative was crucial as part of the change process. Social acceptance was the main support mechanism that allowed them to change their identity into a more conventional one, where they could adopt law-abiding social norms (Elisha et al., 2012). However, redemption and condemnations scripts remain relatively unexplored with sex offenders.

It is apparent that the cognitive shifts necessary for offenders to transform their identity require the capacity for cognizance, redemption, conventionality, and acceptance by

others. The changes are not just internal, but also informed and influenced by external forces. One salient external force for sex offenders is the label. The label may exclude them from adopting society's conventions, either by their choice or by society's refusal to accept them in return. It is to labeling theory that this discussion now turns.

### ***LABELING AND STIGMA***

Sex offenders are a highly stigmatized offender group. Public perceptions of sex offenders suggest that they reoffend at high rates and are not amenable to treatment (Matravers, 2003; Sample and Bray, 2003). Sex offenders also commit crimes considered by the public to be the most "evil" (Waldram, 2010). This label of evil consequently portrays all sex offenders as being depraved, mentally ill, and incapable of rehabilitation (Spencer, 2009). In fact, lawmakers feel that sex offenders are a serious problem for communities, only laws and restriction will deter them, and they cannot be rehabilitated (Meloy et al. 2013). The literature on public opinion of sex offenders also shows that most believe sex offenders abuse children, thereby perpetuating the idea that sex offenders are a homogenous group of child molesters (Kernsmith et al. 2009; Levenson, D'Amora and Hern, 2007; Matravers, 2003; Meloy et al., 2008).

As a result of these perceptions and criminal justice sanctions, the label of sex offender has become a master status (Becker, 1963). Labeling theory suggests that the offender label in general is both the cause and effect of criminal behavior (Lemert, 1967). Labeling occurs firstly at the time of the crime, as well as secondly after in the form of stigma. Stigma is defined as a combination of labeling, stereotyping, separation, status loss, and discrimination (Goffman, 1959; Link and Phelan, 2001). Link and Phelan (2001: 369) state that people are stigmatized when "they are labeled, set apart and linked to undesirable

characteristics,” which leads to status loss and discrimination. Most stigma research has been at the micro-level. However macro-level studies are necessary to understand issues related to “pervasive, socially shaped exclusion” (Link and Phelan, 2001: 366). Macro-micro level connections are useful when considering the stigma experience of sex offenders because they are stigmatized by close others as well as in larger, structural ways, like the registry.

Bernberg and Krohn (2003) present a version of labeling theory linked with the life course approach that emphasizes the mediating role of structural disadvantage. Differential labeling along the life course may lead to the label’s enhanced effects, especially concerning conventional opportunities like employment and education (Lopes, Krohn, Lizotte, Schmidt, Vasquez, and Bernburg, 2012; Sampson and Laub, 1997). In this theory, the authors outline three mechanisms of labeling: identity transformation, social exclusion, and deviant peer groups. Using panel data from the Rochester Youth Study, Bernberg and Krohn (2003) found that the official offender label in adolescence was linked with reduced likelihood of graduating high school or finding employment. Official labeling also had a direct effect on subsequent criminality. Sex offenders are also affected by structural disadvantage. Not only are they excluded by family, but they are also stigmatized by other types of offenders, the criminal justice system, and communities (Robbers, 2009). It is important to examine the label’s effects for sex offenders on “critical arenas” of life such as work and school (Lopes et al., 2012; see also Link, Cullen, Struening, ShROUT, and Dohrenwend, 1989). Bernberg and Krohn (2003) suggest that labeling might increase association with deviant sex offender peers. In a study of 29 sex offenders’ post-release experiences, being shunned by society indicated to the offenders they were not part of mainstream norms and value systems, which caused them to consider relationships with other criminals (Mbuba, 2012).

Another component of labeling and stigma is the “us” versus “them” distinction (Link and Phelan, 2001). This type of “othering” has been observed between the public and offender populations. This process sets offenders apart from non-offenders as different and dangerous (Cowburn and Dominalli, 2001; Kort-Butler, 2012). Othering the criminal reinforces conventional ideals and distinguishes the moral values of the non-offender group as superior (Kort-Butler, 2012; Spencer, 2009). Othering has also occurred between different offending groups. In particular, sex offenders are conceptualized as different from the “normal” criminal (Hudson, 2005). In a study of sex offenders living in a hostel in New Zealand, Hudson (2005) found that drug offenders always referred themselves as the ‘other,’ but sex offenders masked their sex offense with the drug offender label in order to avoid internalizing this label. The othering of the sex offender by both the community and general offenders is linked with increased feelings of isolation and shame in the sex offender (Scully, 1988).

Braithwaite (1989: 100) proposes that part of the purpose of the labeling process is to produce shame, and explains that “Shaming, unlike purely deterrent punishment, sets out to moralise with the offender to communicate reasons for the evil of her actions.” Braithwaite (1989) distinguishes between reintegrative and disintegrative shaming models for the reentry population. Reintegrative shaming occurs while the offender is only punished by the criminal justice system, and society welcomes the offender back as a productive member. In contrast, disintegrative shaming occurs when an offender is stigmatized or shunned upon returning to society. Braithwaite (1989) suggests disintegrative shaming creates a group of outcasts who adhere to the criminal lifestyle because criminal society accepts them. Sex offenders consistently go through disintegrative shaming through status

degradation ceremonies (Garfinkel, 1956). Status degradation processes apply a one-dimensional, lower status label to an individual and any other labels or identities are denied such that:

The other person becomes in the eyes of his condemners literally a different and new person. It is not that the new attributes are added to the old nucleus. He is not changed, he is reconstituted. What he is now is what, “after all”, he was all along (Garfinkel, 1956: 421).

Offenders routinely experience status degradation ceremonies through the criminal justice system, where they are labeled and processed with their offense as their single most important identifying characteristic (Becker, 1963; Braithewaite and Mugford, 1994; Edwards and Hensley, 2001; Maruna, 2004). This is a salient process for sex offenders. Once charged defendants are labeled throughout the criminal justice process and must organize their stories around the idea of being a sex offender (Waldram, 2007). Further, the degradation ceremony continues or repeats itself when the offender registers, applies for new housing, or is identified by someone through the registry. Social stigma can reinforce sex offenders’ maladaptive identities by ostracizing and isolating them from prosocial alternatives (Gobbels, Ward, and Willis, 2012). These alternatives include conventional others who support and encourage normative ideals and provide opportunities for reform (Gobbels et al. 2012). Rather, sex offender policies can be conceived as a form of “modern day banishment” from communities and normative identities (Spencer, 2009).

Labeling and shame are linked to identity. Managing shame about one’s behavior involves a nuanced process of developing a new, socially acceptable image while suppressing the undesirable aspects (Collins and Nee, 2010; Goffman, 1963). Some suggest that those who cannot fully desist may view themselves as having little chance of a better life and may have an “impoverished sense of agency” (Ward, 2002: 533). Punitive orientations in

society may make the latter true for sex offenders (Collins and Nee, 2010). In qualitative interviews with sex offenders, both Hudson (2005) and Collins and Nee (2010) found that most described the heterogeneity of sex offenders as a group, but their singular identity within the wider social context was challenging. The sex offender stereotype of the stranger, the child predator (the master status) supersedes an alternative identity of anyone with a sex offender label. Sex offenders suggested that the varying degrees of offending were obscured by an overarching sex offender prejudice (Collins and Nee, 2010; Hudson, 2005). The fact that they could not escape the sex offender label was salient for them. Also, the loss of social opportunities because of stigmatization after a sex offense conviction may produce the same effects as the rejection, isolation or social inadequacy that elicited the sex offending behavior in the first place (Mingus and Burchfield, 2012). Mingus and Burchfield (2012) found most sex offenders believe they are devalued and discriminated against by society. The majority of sex offenders in the study indicated that, in response to discrimination, they would first avoid any situation where they might incur stigma, but if unavoidable, they would educate others on their offense's circumstances (Mingus and Burchfield, 2012).

Being devalued and discriminated against by the community creates additional challenges. Using a sample of 153 sex offenders in Virginia, Robbers (2009) found that being labeled a sex offender was the most challenging part of reintegration. Offenders reported having trouble with the registry and employment, lying to employers and coworkers, being unable to advance in careers, losing contact with offspring, feeling embarrassed and isolated, experiencing difficulties with intimate relationships, and being afraid of public humiliation (Robbers, 2009). Robbers (2009: 5) stated, "Policy makers have forgotten the lessons of labeling theory and that labels are applied excessively to sex offenders throughout the United

States.” Study participants also discussed the effects of social exclusion. A majority of sex offenders in Robbers’ (2009) study were not involved in their communities. In fact, 20% of the sample indicated they were currently living in communities they did not consider their own. This was in order to avoid negative treatment by remaining anonymous and not drawing attention. The consequences of residency restriction and the concomitant stigma set offenders apart, and this segregation from the community may be detrimental to desistance (Uggen et al., 2004).

The life course paradigm consists of many theoretical orientations to that are useful in exploring the desistance process for sex offenders. It is clear that considering social structure, labeling and identity transformation processes are crucial to uncovering the mechanisms at work in this process. Moreover, the cognitive shifts in these desistance theories remain underexplored for sex offenders. This gap is an important one to fill considering sex offenders’ increased exposure to the cognitive restructuring practices aimed at reducing criminal behavior. Examining how the desistance paradigm is integrated with the treatment models may provide insight into how mechanisms of desistance might be conditioned for sex offenders.

### ***SEX OFFENDER TREATMENT AND DESISTANCE***

It is commonly perceived that sex offenders require indefinite treatment, because, unlike substance abusers or violent criminals, they are impossible to cure (Elisha et al., 2012). Most sex offenders are mandated to attend therapy after their conviction to address sexually deviant behavior.<sup>2</sup> Scholars suggest that mandating that this particular group of offenders participate in treatment is appropriate because many are overcoming denial of

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<sup>2</sup> In Missouri, under *Revised Missouri Statute 589.040*, most sex offenders are required to complete the Missouri Sex Offender Program (MOSOP) while in prison. Upon release, it is a common stipulation of parole to continue sex offender treatment through community service providers.

offending behavior and require coerced treatment to break through these patterns (Marshall, Eccles and Barbaree, 1993). Despite the opinion that sex offenders are not amenable to treatment, studies consistently demonstrate its effectiveness in reducing sexual recidivism (Nagayama Hall 1995; Hanson and Bussiere, 1998; Hanson, Gordon, Harris, Marques, Murphy, Quinsey, and Seto, 2002; Beckett, Beech, Fisher, and Fordham, 1994; McGrath, Cumming, Livingston, and Hoke, 2003; Dwyer, 1997; Olver, Wong, and Nicholaichuk, 2009; Perez and Jennings, 2012). In a meta-analysis of 61 studies, Hanson and Bussiere (1998), found that sex offenders who completed treatment were at a lower risk of reoffending than those who did not complete treatment.

Most sex offender treatment programs follow a cognitive behavioral therapy model (CBT; Laws and Marshall, 2003; McGrath et al., 2010). CBT programs focus on identifying deviant patterns that lead to offending, cognitive distortions associated with offending, condition deviant arousal, and deficits in social intimacy (Yates, 2009). CBT programs also involve building skills, such as social skills, management of negative affective states, and problem solving skills (Yates, 2009). Empathy training and moral deficits building are common elements of most CBT programs (Carich et al. 2003). Empathy refers to the ability of offenders to understand their victims' pain and the impacts of their crimes (Carich et al., 2003: 257). Research suggests that successful application of empathy provides the motivation for offenders to remain crime-free (Pithers, 1999).

CBT challenges deviant identities and encourages the cognitive transformations that are necessary to understand the offense as well as prevent future offending. Offenders are viewed as being deficient in cognitive processes, which results in faulty thinking (thinking errors) and deviant responses (Abelson, 1976). Cognitive restructuring is an appropriate



method of treatment for sex offenders because they suffer from deficits in this social information processing and intimacy, which leads to distorted thinking (Blake and Gannon, 2008; Bumby and Hanson, 1997; Marshall, 1989; 1993). Cognitive distortions are often the explanation for sexual offending and the focus of treatment (Bumby, 1996; Gannon and Plashek, 2006; Marshall, Marshall, and Ware, 2009b). Ward (2000) conceptualizes this duality in his implicit theories of cognitive distortions. Implicit theories underlie the schemas related to sex offending behavior and are considered implicit because they are informal and difficult for the offender to articulate. The relevant schemas encompass deviant sexual thoughts, the motivation to offend, and the justification for the behavior. Ward (2000) suggests there are two types of distortions: those that lead to the offending behavior and those that are associated with explanations for the behavior.

Denial and minimization of sex offending are the most common cognitive distortions and are associated with increased recidivism (Baldwin and Roys, 1998; Blagden, Winder, Thorne and Gregson, 2011; Hudson, 2005; Kennedy and Grubin, 1992; Langevin, 1988; Langton, Barbaree, Harkins, Arenovich, Mcnamee, Peacock, Dalton, Hansen, Luong, and Marcon, 2008; Levenson and MacGowan, 2004; McAlinden, 2007). Admitting to the offense is a common marker for successful treatment participation, and denial signifies continued distorted thinking. In some instances, denying the sex offense is a result of the distorted perspectives the offender may have about sexual behavior in general, but research has shown that denying the offense has been perceived as a common method for sex offenders to minimize the importance of consequences related to the stigma of sex offending (O'Donahue and LeToruneau, 1993). Other research suggests that denial of wrongdoing or distortion of reality is a common psychological defense mechanism (Maruna and Mann, 2006; Navathe,

Ward and Gannon, 2008; Waldram, 2010), and disallowing sex offenders to use it over the course of their therapy might produce deleterious effects. Cognitive distortions in the form of justifications, minimizations, and denial may actually be indicators of the “positive moral notions” to which one might attempt to adhere (Waldram, 2010:271). Making excuses for misbehavior may signify accepting society’s norms and attempting to present conventionality (Ciardha, 2011; Maruna and Mann, 2006). In fact, Kelly (2000) found that clients in therapy who worked on their self-presentation rather than fully disclosing their offense derived greater benefits from treatment than those who did not because they could influence the favorable or unfavorable views of others.

Empathy also plays a major role in sex offender treatment (Bumby, 2000; Bumby and Hanson, 1997; Grady and Rose, 2011; Hanson, 2003). Empathy involves both cognitive and affective structures of the psyche and refers to the ability of offenders to understand their victims’ pain and the impacts of their crimes (Carich, Metzger, Baig, and Harper, 2003: 257; Hanson, 2003). Hanson (2003) argues that empathy training should address deficits in the cognitive and emotional appraisals of harm to victims. Training targets these deficits through exercises in perspective taking and emotion management. Hildebran and Pithers (1989: 237-238) suggest that “an empathic connection with a potential victim motivates the offender to set in motion all of the mechanisms he has learned to keep from offending.” Role-taking is an important aspect of the symbolic interactionist tradition and highly relevant to the study of sex offenders. Through treatment, sex offenders are expected to take on the roles of their victims to enhance empathy and perspective taking (Scully, 1988). Research has highlighted the perceived importance of empathy training as a component of successful treatment programs (Colton, Roberts, and Vanstone, 2009; Day, 1999). In a study of 35 sex offenders

in treatment, Colton et al. (2009) found that 57% identified empathy as the most important tool they learned.

However, finding a consistent application of empathy in treatment has been challenging (Blake and Gannon, 2008). For example, there is no consensus about whether empathy is a state or trait, and some studies suggest it is a multi-dimensional construct which adds to the complexity of the problem (Carich et al., 2003; Grady and Rose, 2011; Serran, Fernandez, Marshall, and Mann, 2004). Also, measures of empathy show that sexual offenders identify with general empathy constructs, but not specific empathy for their victims (Tierney and McCabe, 2001). Consistent with the treatment program in the study state, an appropriate definition of empathy is a cognitive faculty that involves emotional recognition, perspective taking, emotion replication and response decision (Marshall, 2002). The presence of empathy is expected to be associated with the motivation to change one's sexually deviant behavior (Pithers, 1999).

### ***SUMMARY***

The sum of this literature review suggests that desistance may operate in unique ways for certain types of offenders. It is clear from the desistance literature that the concepts of social structure, cognitive transformation, labeling, and identity are paramount to understanding why offenders initiate, persist in and desist from crime (Laws and Ward, 2011). Very recently, research has begun examining aspects of desistance for sex offenders; however these studies have been quantitative in nature. While many criminological theories and studies have incorporated psychological and social psychological concepts, very few have applied these ideas to the desistance process for sex offenders. More specifically, concepts related to cognitive scripts and identity transformation also have been neglected. In

addition to addressing these gaps in the literature, this study considers the unique experiences of sex offenders mandated to participate in cognitive behavioral interventions. The current investigation adds to the literature by examining relationships of psycho-social concepts with sex offender desistance using a qualitative longitudinal study design. This dissertation will explore the following research questions:

- 1) *How might the emergence of redemption or condemnation scripts in sex offenders' narratives be related to patterns of desistance?*
- 2) *What are sex offenders' perspectives on treatment, rehabilitation and the likelihood of reoffending?*
- 3) *What types of cognitive scripts do sex offenders express that are linked to their identities as sex offenders?*

### **CHAPTER 3: DATA AND METHODS**

Prior research on desistance has focused on offenders as a single group, and until recently sex offenders remained relatively unexplored in the desistance literature. This emerging body of research has focused on uncovering aspects of criminal careers for sex offenders specifically, such as age of onset, frequency, prevalence, and cessation, (see Lussier and Cale, 2013; Laws and Ward, 2011). However, these studies have been quantitative in nature, and qualitative examinations of aspects of desistance for sex offenders have been rare. While quantitative, longitudinal studies are the most common in desistance research, they cannot always account for the dynamic and personal characteristics of the participants (Lebel, Burnett, Maruna and Bushway, 2008; Paternoster and Bushway, 2009). Personal accounts acquired through qualitative methodology may be useful in explaining desistance and *how* and *why* it occurs. Accounts can demonstrate the meanings of events in people's lives, as well as illuminating identity and personality development (Giordano et al., 2002; Maruna and Copes, 2005; Presser, 2009; Scott and Lyman, 1968; Singer, 2004). In-depth interviews can help unpack the mechanisms that connect salient life events across the life course, especially those related to personal choice and situational context. Qualitative methodologies "get close to subject matter and strive to understand it through lived experience and perspectives of critical actors" (Shover, 2012: 11). Interviews provide data that allow researchers to evaluate how life events, as well as mundane activities, are understood, interpreted, and responded to by the individual experiencing them (Katz, 1988; Orbuch, 1997; Shover, 2012).

In general, qualitative data sets tend to be cross-sectional. Some qualitative desistance studies have employed longitudinal data sets to understand the phenomena (Giordano et al., 2002; Giordano, 2010; Laub and Sampson, 2003; Sampson and Laub, 1993). One of the

benefits of longitudinal qualitative studies is that they can provide the same in-depth analysis, but within the context of individuals' life changes over time. This dissertation relies on an initial (*Phase 1*) and follow-up (*Phase 2*) interview from a sample of sex offenders conducted three years apart. Follow-up interviews provide retrospective narratives that give insight into the aspects of desistance and identity transformation that may have arisen or become salient since the initial interview.

Using a qualitative approach, this dissertation explores the desistance process for sex offenders by examining aspects of identity transformation within the structural context of being labeled a sex offender. Individual cognitions about sex offending behavior is under consideration, as well as the way in which the environment and the participants' structural disadvantages shape them. Additionally, this project examines the influence of treatment on offenders' perceptions of reoffending, and presents newly uncovered scripts unique to sex offenders. The first section of this chapter describes the data sampling and collection for *Phase 1* and *Phase 2*. Descriptive analyses are presented for both *Phase 1* and *Phase 2* samples. Following this, desistance is operationalized and new categories of desistance are identified. Then, the study's analytic strategy is described.

### ***DATA AND STUDY DESIGN***

The data for this dissertation come from in-depth, semi-structured, qualitative interviews conducted with a sample of sex offenders in Missouri. These data are part of a larger research project funded by the National Institute of Justice (see Huebner et al. 2012). In that research, interviews with 73 sex offenders and 25 non-sex offenders were collected. These interviews focused on multiple re-entry-related issues such as housing, employment, social support, and experiences with sex offender residency restrictions. This dissertation

focuses only on the male sex offenders in the sample and proceeds in two phases. *Phase 1* analyzes data from the original sample of 73 male sex offenders.<sup>3</sup> *Phase 2* consists of 29 follow-up interviews after three years.

## **PHASE 1**

The first phase of the study analyzes the initial sample of male sex offenders (n=73). The 73 male sex offender interviews were collected between May 2010 and August 2010. Interviews were collected at three probation and parole offices, three community supervision centers, and one prison by three researchers. A non-probability quota sampling procedure (Bachmann and Schutt, 2007) was used to obtain, as closely as possible, equal numbers of respondents from each location.

Offenders recruited for this study had to be on probation, on parole, or in prison for a sex offense, and they had to be subject to residency restrictions and registration requirements.<sup>4</sup> Missouri residency restrictions prohibit sex offenders from living within 1,000 feet of a school, park or daycare, and offenders are required to register with the state database every six months. To recruit participants at probation and parole offices (n=26) and community release centers (n=20), officers provided a brief overview of the research and asked for volunteers.<sup>5</sup> The officers coordinated interview times when the participants and researchers were available. Prior to beginning the interviews, researchers gave participants information regarding the study, assured confidentiality, and asked each to sign a consent

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<sup>3</sup> The original sample of sex offenders also included three females. Due to the limited number of female sex offenders, this dissertation will focus on the experience of males.

<sup>4</sup> Some sex offenses are not subject to the Missouri residency and registration requirements; however this study focused on those who must abide by these requirements.

<sup>5</sup> Unfortunately, a refusal rate for this study is not known, because individuals were recruited by MoDOC personnel, and these data were not recorded.

form. Those on probation or parole were interviewed in private offices at their supervising office and were compensated \$20 for their participation.

Some participants were interviewed while in prison (n=27). To be eligible they had to be near their release date. They were then randomly selected from a list by the research team. Interviews occurred in private offices at the prison, and the same consent process described above was administered. In this case, MoDOC policy prohibited incentives for inmates, so they were ineligible for compensation. This limitation did not appear to hinder participation; participants in prison seemed more than willing to be interviewed. Interviews lasted 90 minutes on average. Interviews were digitally recorded and then transcribed, and a pseudonym was assigned to each offender.

The interview guide used in *Phase 1* was semi-structured and modeled after prior research of this type (Visher, LaVigne and Travis, 2004; see Appendix A). The interview guide covered a range of topics, including prison life and re-entry challenges such as housing, employment, substance abuse, treatment, and sex offender restrictions. Participants were also asked about their offending in general and their thoughts about the future. Considerable probing in each domain gathered more detailed information and encouraged participants to speak candidly about each of the topics. The interview guide also included some closed-ended questions and scales.

Descriptive statistics for the *Phase 1* sample are presented in Table 1. This sample is primarily white with an average age of 42 at the time of the interview in 2010. The majority of offenders were convicted of an offense against a minor (70%).<sup>6</sup> This is not surprising, considering offenses with child victims carry the largest penalties; since the goal of the

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<sup>6</sup> Sex offense charges include various degrees of rape, statutory rape, sodomy, statutory sodomy, child molestation, sexual assault, possession of child pornography, and endangering the welfare of a child.



original study was to interview sex offenders nearest their prison release date, we were more likely to capture these offenders. Most offenders were single or divorced; 40% reported being married or partnered at the time of the interview. Almost three quarters (73%) of the sample reported having children. Many offenders (74%) reported a history of substance abuse. A small proportion (31%) reported physical health problems like high blood pressure, heart conditions and diabetes, and another portion (37%) reported mental health problems like depression and bipolar disorder. This sample had an average of 1.8 prior incarcerations and had spent an average of five and a half years in prison for their offense. The vast majority (87%) participated in sex offender treatment while in prison, and many (69%) participated while in the community upon release. The majority of the sample was interviewed while in the community; 27% of the interviews took place in prison.

**Table 1. Phase I Descriptive Statistics (n=73)**

<b>Variable</b>	<b>Mean (SD)/Percent</b>
<b>Age at time of interview</b>	41.75 (13.21)
<b>Black</b>	30%
<b>Offense was against a minor</b>	70%
<b>Relationship Status</b>	
Married	22%
Partnered	18%
Single	32%
Divorced	28%
<b>Education (years)</b>	12.14 (1.81)
<b>Has children</b>	73%
<b>Number of children</b>	2.85
<b>History of drug use</b>	74%
<b>Mental health problems</b>	37%
<b>Physical health problems</b>	31%
<b>Number of prior imprisonments</b>	1.84
<b>Length of time in prison (months)</b>	66.45 (79.87)
<b>SO Treatment in prison</b>	87%
<b>SO Treatment in community (n=67)</b>	69%
<b>Incarcerated at Phase I interview</b>	27%

A comparison with the total sex offender population provided in the *2010 MoDOC Profile of the Institutional and Supervised Offender Population* suggests the present sample is representative of sex offenders supervised in Missouri in regard to type of offense, criminal history, age, and race (Lombardi, 2010).

## **PHASE 2**

In the second phase of this study, I conducted follow-up interviews with 29 of the original sex offenders. I used a multiphase contact process to obtain these interviews. First, I contacted all 73 offenders in *Phase 1*. At the time of contact in 2013, 11 offenders were in prison, 19 were on parole and 43 had completed their term of supervision or prison sentence and were residing in the community. I was required by MoDOC to contact offenders in prison and on parole via their parole officer or prison officials. To minimize the appearance of coercion, I provided officials with a script to read. I presented offenders with a formal letter requesting their participation and (for those on parole) provided an incentive of \$20. I explained the purpose of the study and reminded offenders of their participation in the original study. I provided a telephone number and university contact information in case offenders had questions, and included the consent form so offenders could familiarize themselves with their rights as research participants. In hopes of increasing participation, I designed the consent form and letter to resemble those in the *Phase 1* study.

I interviewed nine participants in five different prisons in Missouri.<sup>7</sup> For each interview, I submitted to a background check and gained permission from MoDOC to digitally record the interview. Offenders were approached by an institutional parole officer who asked whether they were interested in participating in the interview. Then an interview

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<sup>7</sup> Two of the 11 offenders in prison did not participate. One of these two declined the interview, and the other was transferred to the Federal Bureau of Prisons and could not be reached after the initial inquiry.

was scheduled through the Warden's office. Two prisons requested I come on non-visitation days, and three prisons requested I interview on visitation days only. At the prisons I visited on non-visitation days, I interviewed participants in the general visitation area, though only the offender and I were present. Interviews on visitation days were more challenging in that, although they took place in the attorney's private room in the general visitation area, the noise from other visitors made the recording difficult. In my last prison interview, the policy regarding professional visits (including research visits) restricted the interview to 30 minutes. Thankfully, correctional officers were flexible and allowed me to complete my interview guide, since I had not been informed of the change. Interviews at the prison lasted an average of one hour.

Offenders on parole were contacted by their parole officer. I first contacted the district administrators of all offices where offenders were assigned, and they provided me with the name of each offender's specific parole officer or supervisor. Offenders were assigned to five different parole offices. Some officers contacted offenders immediately after my request, and others waited until their next appointment. Some officers had offenders contact me directly, while others made an interview appointment that coincided with the offender's next parole appointment. Of the 19 parolees, only one refused to participate, and another eight never contacted me for an interview. In total, 11 parolees were interviewed. Most participants on parole were interviewed in a private room in the parole office.<sup>8</sup> Interviews with parolees lasted about 90 minutes each.

Offenders in the community and not on supervision were slightly more challenging to reach. I mailed the form letter and a postage paid return envelope with a contact sheet to each

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<sup>8</sup> One offender on parole was given permission by his officer to be interviewed at a Waffle House near his home because the distance to the parole office was too great.

offender. Addresses for these men were obtained through the Missouri Highway Patrol Sex Offender Registry online database. Initial letters were mailed in May 2013. Most of the addresses were accurate with only eight returned by the postal service marked “returned to sender” or “not at this address.” Also, two offenders were noted as absconders (non-compliant), and two offenders had moved to states where the same registry information was not available. Five offenders responded to the initial letter. After approximately three weeks, I sent another set of letters requesting participation and obtained four additional participants. Finally, one month later, I sent a final set of letters to the remainder of the sample and obtained one more participant. Over the course of this process, I received responses from three offenders who were never interviewed. These individuals contacted me initially, but never responded to my follow-ups. In total, 10 offenders in the community were interviewed. Interviews with participants in the community took place at a variety of locations, including the participant’s former parole office (3), public library (1), Denny’s restaurant (1), UMSL (1), McDonald’s (2), transitional house (1), and via phone (1; this offender now resides in Florida). Interviews durations ranged from 45 minutes to two hours. Descriptive statistics of the *Phase 2* sample are presented in Table 2. A profile of participants indicating their pseudonyms, ages, desistance categories, instant offenses, victim types, and prior sexual offenses, is presented in Appendix C, along with a description of the offense statutes included in this sample.

Characteristics of the offenders who responded and of those who did not respond were compared to determine if there were significant differences. Offenders who responded to *Phase 2* interview requests were significantly older than the non-respondents ( $t(72) = -2.734, p=.008$ ). There was also a statistically significant difference between respondents and

non-respondents in terms of length of time in prison. Those who responded in *Phase 2* served longer periods in prison ( $t(72) = -2.388, p = .020$ ). There was a statistically significant difference between the original sample and respondents based on physical ailments, where offenders in *Phase 2* were more likely to report physical health problems ( $\chi^2 = 5.087(29), p = .024$ ). There were no other statistically significant differences between the offenders in the original sample and those who responded in *Phase 2*.

**Table 2. Phase 2 Descriptive Statistics (N=73)**

	<b>Phase 2 (N=29)</b>	<b>Non-Respondents (N=44)</b>
<b>Variable</b>	Mean (SD)/Percent	Mean (SD)/Percent
<b>Age*</b>	46.71 (14.94)	38.41 (11.02)
<b>Race</b>		
<i>Black</i>	24%	33%
<i>White</i>	76%	67%
<b>Education (years)</b>	12.2 (1.85)	12.04 (1.58)
<b>In an intimate partner relationship</b>	60%	80%
<b>Has children</b>	67%	77%
<b>Offense was against a minor</b>	70%	70%
<b>Number of prior imprisonments</b>	1.79 (1.13)	1.88 (1.14)
<b>Length of time in prison at Phase 1 (months)*</b>	90.56 (91.69)	50.55 (51.25)
<b>SO Treatment in prison</b>	93%	82%
<b>SO Treatment at the time of Phase 1 interview</b>	72%	67%
<b>SO Treatment at the time of Phase 2 interview</b>	48%	-
<b>History of drug use</b>	77%	73%
<b>Other offenses than sex offense<sup>9</sup></b>	45%	-
<b>Mental health problems</b>	39%	36%
<b>Physical health problems*</b>	46%	21%

\*Significant differences between respondents and non-respondents at  $p > .05$

<sup>9</sup> Knowledge of this criminal history is only available for those offenders who consented to the *Phase 2* interview. While some non-respondents had disclosed other offenses during *Phase 1* interviews, and while the average number of prior imprisonments is 1.8, it is assumed most offenders had prior records. Nonetheless, this information could not be calculated for this dissertation without consent from every *Phase 1* participant.

The follow-up interview guide closely resembles the interview guide used in *Phase 1* (see Appendix B). *Phase 2* employed the free association narrative interview method, where the follow-up interview is informed by the first interview (Gadd, 2012). This method allows for contextualizing the participants' present responses with those of the past. The follow-up interviews provided important details about the participants' lives since the initial interview and included aspects related to behavioral desistance. I began all interviews describing the purpose of the study to the participants and reminding them of their participation in *Phase 1*. I also briefly summarized the status of the original project and emphasized how helpful their participation had been. At the time of the interviews the final report (see Huebner et al., 2012) was being prepared. The first question asked participants to describe important events that had happened since the original interview in 2010. Most participants first reported their criminal justice involvement (if they had had any or were back in prison) which became the organizing framework for discussing life events. Participants who had completed their supervision were asked to describe events that had occurred before and after their completion date. The most notable extension of the initial interview guide is the addition of questions regarding identity, self-concept, and desistance. Additional questions have been adapted from prior research to explore these concepts (Burnett and Maruna, 2004; Lebel et al. 2008; Maruna, 2001). These questions guide participants in talking about themselves and encourage them not to situate their experience only in the context of being sex offenders (Waldram, 2007). Additional sections in the interview guide sought information about the sex offender label, inquiring about offending behavior, experiences in prison, likelihood of reoffending, and meanings of rehabilitation.

## ***OPERATIONALIZING DESISTANCE***

Because there is no universally accepted definition of desistance, measuring it is challenging (Kazemian, 2007; Laws and Ward, 2011). In this study, the concept of desistance for sex offenders may be even more difficult to operationalize. Because sex offenders have a lower base rate of reoffending than other offenders have (Bynum, 2001), the definition of recidivism may need to be refined (Lussier and Cale, 2013). Some studies show sex offenders take longer to reoffend sexually, but it is possible these offenders “fail” in other ways. No offender in this study had returned to prison for a new sexual offense by the time of the second interview.

In this study, indicators of official and behavioral desistance are used. Indicators of official desistance are used to determine the primary categories of desistance and persistence. Official records regarding arrests, convictions, returns to prison and technical violations were obtained from the MoDOC, from May 2010 (beginning of *Phase 1*) to November 2013 (end of *Phase 2*). In all, 17 offenders had been arrested, five had been convicted of new crimes, and 19 had returned to prison for technical violations.<sup>10</sup>

Consideration of behavioral indicators facilitated a more nuanced understanding of desistance. Behavioral desistance is the self-reporting of illegal or deviant behaviors (Kazemian, 2007). This study gathered self-reported information on deviant acts that were included in the analyses. The nature of sex offenders’ violations presents important distinctions in the types of behavior they are aiming to prevent. These violations are a type of signaling behavior that suggests an offender is returning to his pattern of deviance (English, 1998). Sex offenders under community supervision may be required to abide by additional stipulations prohibiting activities that are not necessarily criminal, but are considered deviant

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<sup>10</sup> Some offenders are counted in all three categories.

and suggest the risk of sexual recidivism, such as viewing pornography or failing to attend court-ordered treatment.

***DESISTANCE PATTERNS***

Desistance patterns identified in this study are consistent with those found in prior research (Maruna, 2001; Laub and Sampson, 2003). In addition to the dichotomous outcomes of *desister* and *persister*, two other categories emerged from the analysis of official data: *emerging desister* and *sex offender persister*. The basis for these categories is presented in Table 3 and depicted in the Logic Model in Appendix D. Descriptive statistics for these categories are presented in Table 4.

**Table 3. Desistance Spectrum (n=29)**

Desister	Emerging Desister	Persister	Sex Offender Persister
6	3	7	13
No new offenses or returns to prison	One prison return, but then demonstrated success	New offense or return to prison, then no success	Return to prison for a sexually related violation, then no success

*Desisters* (n=6) were classified as participants who had no new offenses or returns to prison during the follow-up period from *Phase 1* to *Phase 2*. Desisters displayed a range of ages and occupations, but three distinct characteristics emerged as compared to the other categories. First, desisters were more likely to have a single sex offense charge as their only felony conviction. Second, no desister had been convicted of child molestation, an offense that has been linked to long-term recidivism. Desisters’ charges consisted of possession of child pornography, sexual assault, and statutory rape. Third, desisters did not have the same degree of “background disadvantage” that the other categories described having (Byrne and



Trew, 2008; Simons and Burt, 2012). While all offenders had troubled lives, desisters had fewer barriers to overcome, had the support of family or others, and did not have significant trauma in their history that was linked with their offending. Desisters also had more characteristics related to behavioral desistance such as abstaining from substance use, and being meaningfully employed.

*Emerging Desisters* (n=3) were characterized by one return to prison, based upon a technical violation, during the follow-up period, but since their release (average of 20 months) they have exhibited compliant and law-abiding behavior. The life events in their narratives resembled desisters' more than they did persisters'. Like desisters, emerging desisters had only one offense on their criminal record. However all three were offenses against a child (2 of whom were family members). Emerging desisters were more likely than desisters to have significant "life problems," such as post-traumatic stress disorder from service in the military. However, emerging desisters were also more likely to have social support that helped them reintegrate into the community than desisters were. Emerging desisters exhibited evidence of behavioral desistance in that they also abstained from substance abuse and had meaningful employment and/or community associations.

As shown in Table 4, desisters and emerging desisters were slightly younger on average than the rest of the categories (41.35 years). Less than half of these individuals had children (44%) and less than one prior imprisonment (.98). All desisters and emerging persisters participated in sex offender treatment while in prison, and 44% continued treatment in the community at the time of the *Phase 2* interview.

*Persisters* (n=7) were mostly consistent with Maruna's (2001) persisters. In this study, persisters were defined as incurring a new non-sexual offense or return to prison, however they are distinct from sex offender persisters in that their recidivism was non-sexual in nature. These individuals were slightly older on average than the other categories (50 years) and had almost three (2.84) prior imprisonments. About half (43%) of persisters were black and slightly more than half were white (57%). Persisters also reported less than a high school education on average. A higher proportion of persisters reported a drug history than the other categories, as well as physical health problems. Persisters also reported the longest time spent in prison. Persisters were also characterized by histories of general offending including burglary, assault, possession or manufacture of controlled substances, and robbery. As with desisters and emerging desisters, each persister also had only one sexual offense on his record. In some cases, this sexual offense had occurred decades earlier, and most criminal behavior had been non-sexual in nature. Persisters were plagued by lengthy criminal records and histories of substance abuse. In this sense, persisters resembled Lussier and Davies's (2011) description of a trajectory of committing sex crime that is reflective of a "transitory phase" of offending rather than indicative of a "sexual criminal career."

Lastly, I identified a separate persister category termed *Sex Offender Persisters* (n=13), who were distinguished by the sexual nature of their recidivism. In the follow-up period, participants in this category returned to prison for violations of their sex offender stipulations related to their supervision. These violations included being near a school or daycare, being near minor children without an approved supervisor, possession of pornography, visiting adult stores, and missing sex offender treatment. No participants in this study committed a new officially recorded sexual offense in the follow-up period. The

majority of sex offender persisters were white (85%) and less than half reported being in an intimate partner relationship (46%). The majority had children (77%). Almost all had completed sex offender treatment in prison, and more than half were in treatment at the time of the *Phase 2* interview.

Sex offender persisters might also be identified by Lussier and Cale (2013: 452) as having “life-course antisocial” tendencies. Sex offender persisters are also more likely to have victimized children. In the sex offender persister category, 83% had child victims, and half of those victims were their own children or grandchildren. Also, sex offender persisters reported significant levels of trauma in their lives that they defined as linked with their sexual offending behavior. Sex offender persisters served more time in prison for their sexual offenses, and the majority (9) had more than one sexual offense. The present qualitative analysis also suggests these individuals are more likely to have significant background disadvantage, including trauma, sexual victimization, early onset of sexual offending, and dysfunctional family relationships (Byrne and Trew, 2008; Lussier and Cale, 2013).

These categories present important distinctions for considering the desistance and persistence of sex offenders. The official differences in recidivism suggest that there are also differences between the precursors to offending. Recidivism differences also have important implications for treatment and prevention of relapse. Throughout the analysis, the categories described above are used for comparison.

**Table 4. Descriptive Statistics by Desistance Category (n=29)**

	<b>Desisters/Emerging Desisters (n=9)</b>	<b>Persisters (n=7)</b>	<b>Sex Offender Persisters (n=13)</b>
<b>Variable</b>	Mean (SD)/Percent	Mean (SD)/Percent	Mean (SD)/Percent
<b>Age</b>	41.35 (18.04)	49.95 (15.76)	48.69 (11.58)
<b>Race</b>			
<i>Black</i>	22%	43%	15%
<i>White</i>	78%	57%	85%
<b>Education (years)</b>	12.64 (2.00)	11.42 (2.07)	12.68 (1.71)
<b>In an intimate partner relationship</b>	22%	57%	31%
<b>Has children</b>	44%	71%	77%
<b>Offense was against a minor</b>	78%	71%	62%
<b>Number of prior imprisonments</b>	.98 (.47)	2.84 (1.48)	1.77 (.83)
<b>Length of time in prison at Phase 1 (months)</b>	54.00 (38.88)	159.00 (148.262)	78.25 (80.40)
<b>SO Treatment in prison</b>	100%	86%	92%
<b>SO Treatment at the time of Phase 1 interview</b>	89%	57%	69%
<b>SO Treatment at the time of Phase 2 interview</b>	44%	22%	54%
<b>History of drug use</b>	67%	86%	77%
<b>Other offenses than sex offense</b>	11%	100%	38%
<b>Mental health problems</b>	44%	29%	42%
<b>Physical health problems</b>	22%	71%	50%

### ***ANALYTIC STRATEGY***

This dissertation uses qualitative analytic approaches to explore sex offenders' perceptions of the desistance process. Qualitative analysis offers a nuanced approach to uncovering themes and patterns in interview data and narratives that explore the concepts of interest and provide insight into unseen concepts (Charmaz, 2006). The analysis was conducted with the assistance of the software program NVivo (QSR International, 2012).

In *Phase I*, the interviews were analyzed using an open coding strategy that followed both grounded theory and modified grounded theory approaches (Charmaz, 2006; Corbin and Strauss, 2008; Perry and Jensen, 2001; Silverman, 2006). Grounded theory refers to the inductive process of gleaning themes emergent in the data (i.e. “grounded”) that are not the result of preconceived notions (Chamberlain, 1999; Charmaz, 2006). Open coding strategies involve reading the data and applying an open-ended code or theme to that particular action, description, or event (Charmaz, 2006). Then, a focused coding approach is taken to the initial themes to specify which themes are most significant. Special attention is also paid in the present study to *in vivo* codes. *In vivo* codes are derived from the participants’ own words and used to preserve the integrity of the language and meanings of the narratives (Charmaz, 2006). This allows for a deeper understanding of the participants’ meanings and helps identify codes that are significant.

The modified grounded theory approach involves coding categories developed by other researchers, in theoretical or qualitative work, for theory testing (Perry and Jensen, 2001). The coding process begins in a more focused fashion, which may or may not confirm the categories; however it is open in the sense that alternative categories can be identified and integrated (Perry and Jensen, 2001). Perry and Jensen (2001: 4) state that, “the openness of the researcher toward new dimensions other than the pre-categories is fundamental.” In the present study, results from open coding and focused coding procedures are compiled into memos to organize sub-analyses of patterns. Data analysis will also consist of a constant comparative method (Chamberlain, 1999; Corbin and Strauss, 2008). This method involves the systematic comparison of statements across all types of data (Chamberlain, 1999). Comparing statements within and across interviews enhances the rigor of the analytic

techniques by demonstrating patterns of convergence and divergence across cases and within the context of each response.

Follow-up interviews in *Phase 2* were analyzed using the same techniques and software, with additional comparative analyses based upon the participants' initial interviews. This method helps to clarify previously coded themes within the context of the lived experiences as they are defined in the follow-up interviews (Corbin and Strauss, 2008). First, interviews were analyzed using an open coding strategy that produced 96 themes, some of which were the same as the *Phase 1* codes, and additional codes relevant to the new questions in *Phase 2*. Then, interviews were re-read following a more focused coding approach, first focusing on the presence of condemnation and redemption scripts, then examining themes related to treatment concepts such as empathy, etiology of offending, and the meanings of rehabilitation. At this point, in order to preserve a coding strategy that was as unbiased as possible, desistance categories were not linked to the narratives. Next, I separated the themes into memos, where I applied the desistance categories to begin the comparative analyses. To enhance inter-rater reliability, memos were sent to a former partner from the *Phase 1* project for analysis. These memos included large extractions from the narratives that represented salient themes of the analysis. The desistance categories were deidentified to allow for a blind, open coding of the data. Following her analysis, the emergent themes relative to desistance categories were confirmed. Throughout the analyses, I utilized a constant comparative approach across themes and participants, and between the *Phase 1* and *Phase 2* interviews. I also relied on deviant case analysis that allowed me to provide counterpoints to themes or concepts emergent in the data.

This rich dataset produced three results chapters. The first results chapter (Chapter 4) discusses the presence of redemption and condemnation scripts in a sample of sex offenders following Maruna's (2001) characterization. Chapter 5 discusses the influence of treatment on desistance and presents offenders' perceived likelihood of reoffending, their definitions of rehabilitation for themselves, and their perceptions of others' definitions of the same concept. Lastly, Chapter 6 presents additional scripts that may have unique applications to the sex offender experience including identity management and their goals for the future.

## CHAPTER 4: REDEMPTION AND CONDEMNATION SCRIPTS OF SEX OFFENDERS

According to some life course criminologists, a cognitive shift must occur for one to successfully transition from a criminal to a non-criminal identity (Giordano et al., 2002; Maruna, 2001; Paternoster and Bushway, 2009; Shover, 1996). This cognitive shift leads to a change from offending (persisting) to law-abiding (desisting) behavior that is a function of the quality of one's overall identity transformation. To achieve this cognitive shift, the offender must recognize the desire to change, be motivated to pursue it, and envision an alternative, "replacement self" (Giordano et al., 2002; Maruna, 2001; Paternoster and Bushway, 2009). These cognitive shifts have not been explored with sex offenders as often as with other offenders, and the added experiences of CBT and structural restrictions may condition the identity transformation process.

To examine this change process, it is useful to engage the Making Good framework. In Maruna's (2001) seminal work, he showed that desisting offenders were more likely to present cognitive scripts associated with the concept of *redemption*. Redemption is a "recovery story" that establishes one's "goodness" (Maruna, 2001:87). In contrast, offenders who persisted in their criminal behavior expressed scripts characterized by *condemnation*. That is, offenders felt condemned by their criminal pasts and possessed no hope for the future. Much scholarship has examined this relationship, but further variation along the spectrum of desistance or persistence has been overlooked, along with potential applications to specific crime types, such as sexual offending. Maruna's (2001) theoretical framework may explain sex offenders' cognitive shifts, considering they undergo CBT and the cognitive behavioral change process is thought to be an essential component of reformation.



As outlined in Chapter 3, the analysis of sex offender recidivism for the study sample produced additional categories of desistance, including desisters, emerging *desisters*, *persisters* and *sex offender persisters*. This chapter aims to examine in the current study sample the natures of the condemnation and redemption scripts associated with these outcomes as described by Maruna (2001). First, I discuss the emergence of condemnation scripts in participants' narratives and link these scripts to the desistance categories. Then, I explore how redemption scripts emerge from the narratives and suggest additional ways in which these scripts operate. Overall, offenders in this study exhibited elements of both condemnation and redemption scripts and did so in idiosyncratic patterns related to their criminal histories, life histories, offense circumstances, and recidivism outcomes. Interviewees often fluctuated between scripts, and narratives provided long streams of consciousness where offenders tried to make sense of their circumstances within the context of being labeled as sex offenders. The results here suggest there is utility in the explanations of desistance provided by the Making Good framework for sex offenders, but the nuances of how condemnation and redemption scripts emerge in sex offenders must be explored further. Throughout the results chapters, I indicate the recidivism outcome status of the offender in parentheses after the initial description in text (D=desister, ED=emerging desister, P=persister, and SOP=sex offender persister).

### ***CONDEMNATION SCRIPTS OF SEX OFFENDERS***

Condemnation scripts of those who persist in criminal offending are characterized by a sense of being “doomed to deviance,” such that offenders feel they cannot escape the inevitability of continued criminal behavior that they have already exhibited throughout their lives (Maruna, 2001). This script reveals a lack of agency, or control, in offenders' lives

(Maruna, 2001). Agency represents one's "purposeful execution of choice and individual will" (Sampson and Laub, 2005: 176). As such, offenders feel victim to their circumstances. Agency can be transformative in that it allows one control over aspects of the future (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998; King, 2013). For sex offenders, this environment is one without much leeway for personal decision making, and this restrictiveness affected many of the scripts that emerged in their narratives. The "discovery of agency" (McNeill, 2006) occurred for all participants regardless of desistance outcome. However agency was exacted in limited ways depending on the types of restrictions present.

Regardless of desistance outcome, all participants expressed condemnation scripts consistent with those of persisters in Maruna's study. However, the important distinction for sex offenders was that they did not feel condemned to reoffend, but rather felt condemned by society's *perception* that they would reoffend. In this way, condemnation scripts were less informed by their perceived likelihood of reoffending (i.e. "I am helpless to change"); rather the likelihood of "failing" was informed by the ways others thought of them and by the idea that they would always be condemned to the sex offender status (Table 5 presents these themes).

Condemnation scripts were informed by the limitations of the sex offender restrictions and the stigma assigned to the label by the community. In particular, the sex offender registry seemed to be one of the most salient factors in feeling condemned. No matter their personal or criminal characteristics, all participants in this study felt that, for them personally as well as for the offender community, the registry perpetuated negative myths and misconceptions about sex offenders. Participants felt that their presence in the registry made them out to be the typified sex offenders, characterized by the image of a

“stranger danger” child molester. Research affirms the presence of this stereotype, as the public are likely to think child molesters are worse than other types of sex offenders (Levenson et al., 2007; Matravers, 2003; Rogers, Hurst, and Davies, 2011). Their anxiety about condemnation arises from the difficulty of reintegrating in the community rather than from the possibility of committing a new crime.. In fact, all participants in this study expressed more confidence in their ability to not reoffend sexually than in their ability to achieve their goals or improve their quality of life. No matter their desistance category, they felt that no one would give them a second chance. For example, Louis (D), who had been convicted of statutory rape, stated that most people say sex offenders “never change; it’s like people don’t want to give you a second chance.”

**DOOMED TO BE LABELED: “ONCE A SEX OFFENDER, ALWAYS A SEX OFFENDER”**

The prevailing element of the condemnation scripts expressed by participants in this sample was not that they felt they were doomed to reoffend, but that society, and sometimes their families and friends, perceived them as highly likely to reoffend because the label of sex offender suggests they are high-risk recidivists. The label has condemned them to a life of constant supervision (both formal and informal), lack of privacy, and an existence that amounts to a “life sentence.” One way participants characterized the gravity of this extended punishment was through comparisons to other criminals, like drug dealers, murderers, and serial killers. Edward (D) stated: “A murderer actually gets out of prison and has it easier than a sex offender. They don’t have to go register for the rest of their life.” Donald (D) also shared this perspective. He had served three years in prison and then five years on parole for having a sexual relationship with a teenage girl. At the time of the *Phase 2* interview he had successfully been off supervision for three years. Donald stated:

Any sex offensive type nature to the crime definitely builds you up to a higher standing with murderers and manslaughter—we're treated exactly the same. Murderers and manslaughter people—they don't have registry. I wonder how that happens. Why were we more important than the murderers and killers? As a matter of fact, murderers walked around without no problems because they don't look up murderers. How many times have you heard somebody say, "I want to look up to see if this guy has murdered anybody?" When was the last time you heard that? Never.

Donald could not make sense of the fact that people who had killed others had a better chance of shedding their criminal identity than he did. This resentment toward the criminal justice system and others about the registry was consistent across recidivism outcomes, but most often expressed by desisters, who felt they were being punished beyond what they deserved.

In addition to comparisons to drug dealers, murderers, and serial killers, participants in this study described the sex offender label in other ways that signaled the isolation and condemnation associated with sex crime conviction. Kevin (P) stated: "It's really hard because sex offenders are like the piece of scum of the Earth, you know?" When asked how the label made him feel, Nicholas (ED) stated: "It makes you feel like a leper. I mean, I think if our big governor has a choice, we'd never get out [of prison]." This perception was also consistent among sex offender persisters, who characterized themselves as "outcasts," but within their descriptions attempted to dispel the "myths" about sex offending. The label was a salient reminder of the guilt and shame associated with sexual offending behavior, and the magnified condemnation may have contributed to persistence. Michael (SOP), who had molested his own daughter over the course of as a decade, related this perspective:

People look at sex offenders as some kind of piece of dirt, and they're nothing more than addictive people who have a problem and have grown up and chosen the wrong way to get rid of the pain, so we are looked at, and I think it's because of the ... when I say media, not just news but all the different shows that are on that portray sex offenders as these horrible God-awful people that only are out to hurt children. I

realize there are some people like that. I would say the majority of the people that I've met in group and so on and so forth are not like that.

Michael felt the label of sex offender did not fit the description of people in his treatment group, and this misconception caused him much anxiety and frustration. Fred (SOP) felt that the stigma associated with the label did not coincide with the reality of sex offending, and that more effort should be placed on understanding why people commit such crimes (Mingus and Burchfield, 2008). He felt the current policies emphasized the wrong elements of sex offending behavior. Fred stated:

There's so much focus on keeping us corralled so we know exactly where we're at. Sex offenders have the second lowest recidivism rate versus murderers. Murder. This is federal government, and it's because most of us realize we don't like who we became so we want to change. I think more effort needs to be on understanding why. That's why I'm so open with you at this because more effort needs to be in preventative measures.

Some sex offender persisters described the label as a signal to others about their own criminal histories. These participants were more likely than others to be under lifetime surveillance because of the severity of their offenses. Raymond (SOP), who was on GPS monitoring, felt that others were able to make quick judgments about him because the monitoring device was akin to a "scarlet letter" on his chest:

That's probably one of the hardest things to do is to always walk around with this sign, this invisible sign, "I'm a sex offender. Don't go near me," or "Don't have anything to do with me." Or that I might be put in a position to explain to someone that I am a sex offender. It doesn't make you feel very good because I feel kind of tainted in a way because I am like the old proverbial red letter or scarlet letter.

For persisters, the label affected them so much so that they perceived it as contributing to ongoing deviance and offending. While persisters mostly resembled Maruna's (2001) characterization, they also shared the same condemnation scripts as the other sex offenders. Gary (P) had been convicted of rape and robbery in the 1970s and had battled a

lifelong heroin addiction. When he was interviewed in *Phase 2* while in a treatment program in the community, he had just returned from a four-month treatment program in prison. Gary related his ongoing substance abuse to his sex offense and the effects of the label:

You know, it make me feel bad, it does. I think it's one of the reasons why I beat myself up. You know, using drugs, you know, because the label itself. Telling you somebody in a group talk about sex offender, child molester, "chi-mo", they call them that, and all that, you know? I can't see myself as a sex offender; it's just what had happened.

In Gary's narrative it becomes clear that the sex offender label carries a stigma with which he does not internally associate himself, but which is a painful reminder of his past. There was no other sex offending behavior in Gary's criminal history; his subsequent convictions were drug-related. Gary described his drug addiction in more detail, saying that he felt helpless to resolve his cognitive dissonance between his drug user and sex offender identities:

You know what, my [therapist] told me yesterday? It must be because I have a vendetta against myself, you know? Seems like I got a loaded Glock to my head with no bullets in it. He said if I could change, do what I'm doing [going through treatment]. Maybe he's right, you know? I've been dealing with this case for so long, you know, I'm just punishing myself being in this predicament. Not a day goes by I don't let it go, you know, being classified as a sex offender.

Andrew (P) was convicted of a sex offense in 1979 at a time that he claimed, "It wasn't as big a deal." Andrew pled guilty to robbery and child molestation because he did not want to take his case to trial. In retrospect, had he understood how a sex offense conviction would have affected his life, he would have fought the charge. Andrew described what a "heavy statement" it was to be called a sex offender for the majority of his life:

First of all, I was a sex offender in the beginning. That in itself, set you in like, pretty much well known that this is a sex offender. You know it's a heavy statement that

goes around with that. That kind of keeps you out of your comfort zone. You're kind of always at the ready, so to speak. I do have a sex offense on my jacket, and it got to the point, I no longer even bother with proclaiming my innocence and all these stuff, because now it's too stereotypical, what everybody else does. I pretty much accepted it, but when I would go out and try to do things it would always come back in some sort of way and bite me.

Andrew described how, no matter what he tried to do to counter the effects of the label, he felt condemned by it—so much so that he stopped trying to shed the identity.

There was little change from *Phase 1* interviews to *Phase 2* interviews in offenders' expressions of feeling condemned by society. In fact, some claimed that continued changes in the laws made matters worse.<sup>11</sup> For example, the following exchange exemplifies this:

KK: How did the restrictions or how do the laws now make you feel about yourself? You mentioned when you first had to register, you were embarrassed.

Louis: Now, I accept it. I accept it for what it is. It's the laws and the laws are to do that and I will do it until the laws change.

KK: Okay. Do you think it will ever get changed?

Louis: Not the way things going out here in this world, no I don't think so. I think they're ready to add some more stuff. That's how I see it. It's for those that keep doing it though, keep constantly doing things. I think that they're going to add new things for those that keep at it.

Desisters shared the perspective that they were being “punished” by the label, and this effect was frustrating and anxiety-provoking. Donald (D) felt completely helpless to change his circumstances and was frustrated that he was still being punished. When asked how the restrictions had affected him after his parole, Donald stated:

They affect me exactly the same as they did when I was on paper. I'm still paying. I don't know what I'm going to do. I pretty much figure my life is over. Any major goals I've set for myself in life just because I had a bad time in my life, I'm going to be paying for it the rest of my life. I'm not going to be getting those goals.

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<sup>11</sup> In summer 2013, the Missouri legislature considered House Bill 301, which would remove juvenile sex offenders from the registry, and House Bill 1700, which would remove certain lesser sex offenses from the registry and allow offenders to petition for removal of their information if they were compliant for a specified period of time.

This sentiment is the greatest departure from Maruna’s characterization of a desister. Desisters in this sample lacked the hope and optimism to move forward with their lives and felt the circumstances that led up to their sex offending behavior were not severe enough to warrant a lifelong sentence. They may have a point—offenders in this category had only one conviction (the sex offense) on their record. Three of these offenders were charged with statutory rape, one with child pornography, and two with assault. All offenses took place under the influence of alcohol and did not reflect a pattern of sexual deviance.<sup>12</sup> Nonetheless, desisters’ expressions of similar condemnation scripts to persisters’ suggest that the condemnation construct may need to be refined for sex offenders.

#### **CONDEMNED BY OTHERS: “THEY HAD NOTHING TO DO WITH ME”**

The support of family and friends is noted as an essential criterion for successful offender reintegration (Hochstetler, DeLisi, and Pratt, 2010; Petersilia, 2001; Travis, 2005; Visher, Knight, Chalfin, and Roman, 2009). Family and friends can provide both the instrumental and emotional support necessary for transformation into a law-abiding citizen (Giordano et al., 2002; Laub and Sampson, 2003). Social networks function as an intimate method of condemnation presented as an extension of Maruna’s (2001) scripts related to “two strikes,” criminogenic backgrounds and criminogenic environments. Legal restrictions and/or social exclusion delivered this sample’s sex offenders into these criminogenic structures. Some participants felt condemned by the responses they had received from family, friends, and other individuals and organizations with which they had had contact.

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<sup>12</sup> Of course, it is acknowledged that the actual number of offenses, victims or sex crime events is difficult to ascertain (Lussier and Cale, 2013), and it is possible these “one-time” offenders have more offenses in their past than officially recorded.



Many of the sex offender persisters' family members and/or friends had ended relationships with them. Typically, the offenders had major family dysfunction prior to their offenses, which may have also contributed to their offending. Over half of sex offender persisters had committed crimes against their families. Carlos's (SOP) family had all but disowned him while he was in prison. Carlos had been convicted of molesting his four-year-old stepdaughter. After his conviction, Carlos's wife divorced him, and he was sentenced to prison. When Carlos was interviewed in *Phase 1*, he was in the prison sex offender treatment program. When interviewed in *Phase 2*, he had remained in prison because he was terminated from the program and ordered to complete the rest of his prison sentence.<sup>13</sup> Carlos was worried that the one person who still cared for him, his mother, was being influenced by siblings who despised him. Carlos stated:

I feel like pretty much that over the past few years that my family's pretty much, most of my family in a way has pretty much kicked me to the side and I've been thinking that certain ones in my family have been getting into my mom's head, telling her that more or less leave me alone and stuff like that. . . . Well, started writing this letter last week and telling her how I get to feeling and signs I get to feeling when I don't hear from anyone for a while that I feel like I've been abandoned and no one wants anything to do with me and stuff like that.

Isolation and abandonment are hallmarks of sexual offending behavior and are usually the first issues dealt with in treatment (Laws and Ward, 2011). The compounding effects of isolation from his family, as well as inability to make progress in treatment, suggest a grim prognosis for Carlos' future prospects for desistance.

In this sample, persisters were more likely than sex offender persisters to reestablish contact with family and friends. Despite having the support of his family and friends after years of being in and out of prison, Andrew (P) described the following support structure:

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<sup>13</sup> Carlos was terminated from the sex offender treatment program for lack of therapeutic gain.

“My mom has been in my corner. My brothers and sisters have been in my corner. Even friends. But it still doesn't take away that stigma.” No matter who supported him, Andrew could not shake the stigma that was now attached to him because of the label. Likewise the reflected appraisal of condemnation from some family members negatively affected Harry (P). Harry had the support of his immediate family, particularly his younger siblings, but less support from the family of his son's mother. This was due to the fact that the crime was committed against this woman's sister, and that the family was not willing to forgive him. Harry stated, “Her family would never learn to accept me for what [I did and] never fully trust me. They would always think [I'm bad] and I'm not that same person anymore.”

Condemnation scripts related to social networks also extended to the prospect of finding intimate partners. Intimate partner relationships for ex-offenders have been shown to contribute to both desistance (Sampson and Laub, 1993) and persistence (Leverentz, 2006; Simons and Burt, 2012). While no one in the study expressed that they had lost a relationship because of their offense, numerous participants, mostly sex offender persisters, described their anxieties about trying to find a relationship. This anxiety may be related not only to their own intimacy deficits, but also to fear of the stigma associated with the types of offenses they had committed. One deviant case was Donald (D), who had successfully completed supervision three years earlier, and did not think he would ever find someone because of the sex offense conviction. His sentiments are consistent with the condemned lens through which he viewed his life circumstances. Donald, working through his thoughts on the dating scenario, said the following:

Look at this way, when you get in a relationship it's by chance in the first place. Once you get past that, then you got the fragile balance of doing something they may not like that will turn them away from you. You get past that. [Then] you meet the kids. You get past that. You're good with the kids. “Hey, I'm a sex offender and I have to

register every three months.” [Then she says] “What? Why didn’t you tell me at the beginning?” [And I say] “Because I enjoyed the relationship I’ve had with you. It’s made me a better person. I am all of a sudden a whole person. Now that you know this about me, here we go downhill.”

While only one desister or emergent desister expressed anxiety related to finding a partner, over half of sex offender persisters were scared to seek out relationships because of the label. The other half were in long-term committed relationships, most of which existed at the time of their offending. The thought of pursuing intimate relationships with others was scary not only because of having to reveal their criminal status, but for sex offender persisters also because it made them feel their deficits in social and intimate relationships. The prospect of engaging in intimate partner relationships required them to have hope and optimism about successfully negotiating the sex offender identity. Patrick (SOP) described how he would have liked to have had a partner, but was uncertain about finding one:

If I could find the right woman, maybe. I still think about my past life if I live my life different and having a whole family. It really hurts. It can really isolate relationships because the person finds out you are a sex offender and how they might view you.

For Patrick, the “right woman” would have to be someone who accepted his past history of molesting young boys and was also ready to deal with the complexities associated with his sexual orientation. Patrick expressed the desiring a female partner, but struggled with his own sexuality.

Paul (SOP) was conflicted about seeking an intimate partner. Paul was married at the time of his offense, but described the relationship as abusive and chaotic. His wife would physically and emotionally abuse him, and they were both addicted to alcohol and drugs. Paul spent 12 years in prison for crimes against his daughters, and was 58 years old when he was released. Despite the standard challenges an offender faces when pursuing intimate

partners with a felony on his record, Paul knew he would face additional issues because of his relationship history and the sex offense label. Paul shared his struggle involving his treatment group:

I'm kind of ... I worry about that because, according to my group, I've got to tell them right off the bat... and ask you out on a date, and you said, "Yes," and the first thing I said to you, "Oh, by the way, I'm a sex offender." What would you do? Would you go out with me or would you not go out with me?

In the narratives of sex offender persisters, deficits in intimacy and difficulty with the label are additional challenges faced when trying to rebuild their identities by participating in normal activities, like dating. The importance of family, friends, and intimate partners was not beyond their understanding, but many sex offender persisters realized they had forever damaged those relationships. In general, desisters, emerging desisters and persisters, were more likely to have better social skills and social networks that accepted them. This substantive difference likely plays a role in the successful reintegration of sex offender persisters, who possibly need that type of support the most (Robbers, 2009).

#### **CONDEMNED BY LACK OF MEANINGFUL EMPLOYMENT**

One of the well-documented challenges felons and ex-felons face is finding gainful and lawful employment (Brown, Spencer and Deakin, 2007; Pager, 2003). Lapse in work history, lack of marketable skills, and the stigma associated with incarceration lead to difficulties obtaining employment upon release from prison (Western, 2006). Even after prison is over and parole has expired, the stigma of a felony conviction is long-lasting (Pager, 2003). Sex offenders may face more stigma than other felons because of public perceptions of sex offenders, restrictions on being employed in certain locations or with minors, and the effects of the registry (Huebner et al., 2012; Robbers, 2009). More importantly for sex offenders, employment is a criterion used to measure improvements in “social competence,”

and deficits in employability are associated with relapse (Epperson, Kaul and Hesselton, 1998). While ex-offenders can conceal felony convictions from employers who do not conduct background checks, sex offenders cannot escape their own presence on the internet registries.

Lack of meaningful employment was a salient challenge for participants in transforming their identities. This was due to the fact that most reported losing jobs they had prior to conviction that paid well, or where the job was part of their self-view because they had been established for numerous years. This outcome was most often cited by desisters, emergent desisters and persisters. In fact, persisters' loss of their work identity was related to their ongoing deviance. Lawrence (P) described how losing his high paying job as an auto mechanic after his conviction. That, coupled with the money-related stress, led him to reoffending by committing a burglary at a video store in town. Lawrence was sentenced to three years in prison. Lawrence described how much the sex offense conviction had affected his life:

I lost a lot of stuff. I lost my good job and I was making like 14 bucks an hour. And I got laid off and pretty much I couldn't find another job anywhere. I tried applying everywhere that I could just, I don't know, I guess I came up with this desperate measures and just figured okay I got to get money somehow and did that [burglary]. Don't know why I did it, but I do now.

Desisters also had challenges with employment, which was one of the primary ways they felt condemned by the label. Finding meaningful employment was very important to desisters, and they were more adversely affected by the sex offender label. Donald (D) was still residing with his parents because he could not find steady employment. He stated:

I haven't got enough to live on my own, that's for sure. That's one of the problems with, that's another question I know you have there. How well can you do as being a

registered sex offender? I just got fired from my job because of that. I'm working for my Dad, helping him pick up stuff where he's been overrunning his own business, that's it. I lost heart of it because you ... can't get a credit card without a consistent job, a good paying job on top of that. Most of the low paying jobs; they don't want felons at all including McDonald's, Wal-Mart and a few others.

For Donald and others in this sample, the fact that sex offenders were not hired at low-wage jobs was an indicator of the severity of the effects of the label's condemnation. Louis (D) described his string of minimum wage jobs since the previous interview, including auto maintenance and delivering pizzas. While he worked hard and found positive things in those jobs, he did not feel like they were opportunities for supporting his family and advancing a career. Louis described further how this type of stress might lead to deviant behavior: "Me personally, it just seems like something reasonable... it makes people fall into doing things in the streets because they ain't got a decent job to do what they've got to do. It brings on a lot stress."

In contrast to these narratives, sex offender persisters did not describe the importance of finding meaningful employment. Working offenders in this sample had jobs at fast food establishments, factories, and retail stores. They said that obtaining these jobs was a matter of luck, rather than merit. Their narratives suggested that they understood their goals of having careers were no longer feasible, and that they were satisfied with taking whichever job someone would allow them.

#### **CONDEMNED BY THE NATURE OF SEX OFFENDING OR OFFENDING BEHAVIOR**

In Maruna's (2001) study, persisters felt like they were not in control of themselves when it came to their criminal behavior. Related to the idea of being doomed to deviance, persisters felt like they had no way out of the offending lifestyle. The current study confirmed this cognitive script as relevant to sex offenders, but the ways in which it appeared

suggest it needs expansion. Throughout all narratives, offenders felt “in control” of their sexual offending behavior, but only if they relied on the principles learned through treatment. However, they did not feel in control when it came to their quality of life, and the examples already presented in this chapter illustrate these feelings. Lack of agency contributed to the cognitive scripts of condemnation. This was particularly true for desisters who felt in complete control of their sexual offending behavior yet did not feel equally in control of other aspects of their lives because of the label’s effects. Many had suffered employment and housing loss that resonated with them. It is likely that the reason desisters felt the most control over their offending behavior is that they had clearly identified the circumstances leading up to their crime, which they could be sure to avoid reproducing. As is discussed in the next section, desisters had taken the treatment opportunity and applied it to their lives more successfully than any other group of sex offenders. However, they were most likely not to feel in control of their day-to-day activities.

The persisters in this study confirmed Maruna’s (2001) characterization, feeling like they were not in control of their general (as opposed to sexual) offending behavior. Persisters explained that because they had battled drug addictions that had contributed to their offending for so long, they doubted their ability to remain completely law abiding. However, they felt confident about not reoffending sexually, especially since they only had one sex offense amongst numerous other offenses. Because of the varied nature of their criminal record, persisters perceived themselves as some other type of criminal with a “sex offense on their jacket.”

However, an expansion of the persister characterization for sex offender persisters must account for the presence of cognitions related to sexual deviance. Sex offender

persisters displayed much confidence about control of their sexual deviance if they continued to practice the cognitive behavioral lessons learned in treatment. However, one of the nuances in the presentation of this cognitive script was that sex offender persisters experienced more challenges than the other categories when trying to recover from their deviant sexual thoughts. Sex offender persisters displayed more pathological behavior in their histories, and this conflicted with the coping techniques they had learned through their treatment program. For example, one pathway to deviant sexuality is “sexualization,” which involves early exposure to sexual experiences, including victimization, that leads “to a broad range of sexual behaviors including impersonal sex, sexual preoccupation, dependence on pornography, compulsive sexual behaviors, and deviant sexuality including paraphilias” (Cale et al., 2013: 38; Lussier et al., 2007). Other research shows that sexual abuse in childhood and poor self-image in adolescence are strong predictors of adult sex offending (Reckdenwald, Mancini, and Beauregard, 2014). This type of background disadvantage may be the most substantive barrier to overcoming sexual deviance (Byrne and Trew, 2008; Simons and Burt, 2012). Sex offender persisters felt like they could not escape the internal struggle with the thoughts and behaviors that contributed to the sex offenses they committed, and this was an important emergent condemnation script in their narratives.

Jason (SOP) described the struggle of reconciling his self-perceived identity with being compared to Ariel Castro, the Cleveland man who had kept three women captive for ten years.<sup>14</sup> Jason had two sex offense convictions and a murder conviction. He served 20 years in prison for a rape and murder, and most recently served four years for molesting his step-granddaughter. Jason described the challenges of being on life-time supervision:

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<sup>14</sup> At the time of the *Phase 2* interview Ariel Castro and his victims had just been discovered, so this story was common in the news.



In some parts of me, I'm very arrogant. Through that arrogance I've somehow justified being above, not being seen like other people and that kind of thing. On the inside, it's always a very tender spot because when I look and see that I'm no different in some ways than the guy that took those women and held them for 10 years, that's scary.

Benjamin's (SOP) condemnation scripts are best described as an accumulation of negative and traumatic events he experienced while out on parole. Benjamin identified as transgendered (though he had not done so in his *Phase 1* interview), and this self-discovery alongside multiple challenges he described—including the death of his mother, lack of acceptance from his son, and being denied school loans—contributed to the internal battle that he felt he had been fighting for decades, and also contributed to his decision to molest his six year old daughter. Benjamin was eventually revoked for viewing pornography and visiting an adult store, which he claims was associated with his sexual discovery. Benjamin described his downward spiral:

Just the fact that my mom died, my son was this [unforgiving], the school was that. I guess I had a preconceived idea that when I got out [of prison], that because I was out everything is going to be fine, roses. As time went on, I was struggling, but it wasn't anything that nobody isn't going through. That was the whole thing that everybody goes through these things in life, and at the time I just felt like I was the only person going through these things. I basically shot myself in the foot.

Benjamin explained how his background disadvantage contributed to ongoing difficulty in dealing with challenges upon release from prison:

I was always pretty much a loner when I grew up, didn't have a whole lot of interaction. My step-dad and I didn't get along. There were a lot of times where I was left to fend for myself. I had low self-esteem. I always thought I was dumb. I wasn't going to succeed. I was always told that by my step dad. Then, as I got older other things started coming out of the woodwork. When you don't know how to deal with issues and the more you stuff things the more they compound, and then you keep stuffing and they compound more, and then after a while you don't even realize it that what could be nothing more than a wallet-size amount of problem turns into a whole backpack of stuff weighing three times as much as what you weigh and you're dragging this along through life. It tends to wear you out.

Michael (SOP) described the internal battle he waged with himself after being convicted of child molestation and sentenced to house arrest in lieu of prison. Michael described his emotional toil and how detrimental he felt his isolation was to his reintegration:

The house arrest I think is totally ridiculous. My crimes mostly were in my house, and here I was sitting there for two and a half years, and there wasn't a day that went by that I didn't remember, and I had to just do everything I could not to sit there and get angry or get depressed or what have you. It didn't keep me from doing anything except bonding back in the world with people and I think if anything, it hindered my progress. The shame that goes with it. I've accepted the fact that what I did 30 years ago was unconscionable, that I did these things that the label and what people think are just the result of my own thinking most of the time.

In Samuel's (SOP) narrative he described the emotional struggle between his own shame and self-worth when he as a sex offender has to tell someone about his crimes:

If there's one thing I've learned about my history of sexual offending, my history of psychological issues, and all these things - rejection - all these things that people with sexual offenses have. You know inadequacy issues, inferiority history, and secrecy. And there's going to be an emotional exchange when you tell someone I've done this. This is who I have been. Emotionally, humanly, that hurts...but if you have the wrong type of shame or the wrong type of guilt and you're ostracized. Now, the shame of offending is far worse. I've got to tell you, there is no solution for the demons that a sexual offender has in their soul, in their bodily addictions, without the cut of forgiveness and human relationships that gets in the mud with you and tries to pull you out of this stuff before it's too late.

The results of this analysis show the need to expand condemnation scripts to apply specifically to sex offenders. However, condemnation scripts were not only apparent for persists in this study. All offenders in this study felt "doomed to be labeled" as opposed to being "doomed to deviance." Participants felt condemned by others' perceptions that they fit the label of sex offender and did not feel capable of fully assuming another identity. They were aware that the sex offender status would always be there. The sex offender label had long-lasting and far-reaching effects on the offenders' self-perceptions and day-to-day activities, even if it did not contribute to ongoing deviance. This suggests that adopting an

alternative identity and eschewing condemnation scripts associated with one’s past life may not be as easy a process for this offender group. Then again, it may be that the nuances of sexual deviance are more clearly manifested in the sex offender persisters’ scripts, which contain both condemnation and cognitive dissonance and are important to understand.

The most important aspect of applying condemnation scripts to sex offenders was the insight into ongoing sexual cognitive distortions. Sex offender persisters exhibited characteristics of condemnation scripts in their discussions of internal struggles with pathological impulses and the “truth” in the sex offender label. Nonetheless, in the larger context of the participants’ narratives, these condemnation scripts were juxtaposed with redemption scripts—especially ones concerning treatment exposure—that helped them imagine a potential alternative.

**Table 5. Condemnation Scripts by Desistance Category**

<b>Desisters/Emerging Desisters</b>	<b>Persisters</b>	<b>Sex Offender Persisters</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Doomed by the SO label</li> <li>-Lacked agency</li> <li>-Challenges for meaningful employment</li> <li>-Felt “punished” beyond their sentence</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Doomed by the SO label</li> <li>-In control of sex offending, but maybe not other offending</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Condemned by the label, but felt stigma because the stereotype</li> <li>-Condemned by the internal sexual struggles</li> <li>-Condemned by family</li> </ul>

***REDEMPTION SCRIPTS OF SEX OFFENDERS***

According to Maruna and colleagues (2009:50), “Desistance is a behavioral concept referring to the absence of criminal behavior after a pattern of offending behavior.

Redemption, on the other hand, is always in the eyes of some beholder, and involves forgiveness and appreciation of a person’s contributions and accomplishments.” Because

desistance and redemption are entwined with one another, it is important to understand not only if sex offenders have ceased their sexual offending, but also if they perceive themselves to be redeemed from their highly stigmatized past. Redemption scripts are characterized as a quest to “make good” the context of their past offending behavior and present to the world their “true self” (Maruna, 2001). To be redeemed, offenders need to create narratives that reconstruct their previous identities into ones that are law-abiding and give back to the community.

In this study, offenders felt they were “stripped” of any identity and automatically labeled sex offenders. As such, this became their master status (Becker, 1963). The automatic identity posed the most difficult challenges for persisters and desisters, who did not feel they were “sex offenders” because they only had one sex offense conviction. The challenges were most salient to those in the desister category, who did not feel they deserved the label, but also felt less motivation to carve out new identities for themselves. For example, Donald (D) stated: “I’m a stripped down mean, lean, business man. [Before I was] happy go lucky and happy to do anything for anybody. I’d get my shirt off my back if I thought it could keep you from getting wet.” Since his criminal justice experience, and partially because of the stigma of being a sex offender, he feels less inclined to associate with others or pursue life goals (Schaefer et al., 2004).

Desisters and persisters were the least likely to express redemption scripts. In fact, their scripts took a tone of *resignation*, characterized by participants’ feelings that they could no longer pursue the life they once dreamed of, or at the very least be perceived as “normal.” Although prior research suggests that optimism about the future is linked with increased likelihood of desistance for general offenders (Lebel et al., 2008; Maruna, 2001; 2004), both

desisters and persisters in this study had fewer redemption scripts reflecting this optimism in their narratives. This is likely due to the oppressive stigma that is associated with a sex offense conviction and contradicts their identities as non-sex offenders. In contrast to expected findings, sex offender persisters expressed a greater optimism of ultimately being redeemed, though they felt the process was ongoing and required more personal work via treatment. Nevertheless, all participants in this study sought redemption. Most were seeking redemption from the label, and the prospect of building a new identity that contrasted the label. Participants did not experience redemption in the general community, but instead through other specific sources of support. Participants revealed redemption scripts in their discussions of treatment, social support, and desire to help others, but the expression of these scripts was not always related to desistance.

A unique artifact of the study group's narratives is that the instances of redemption scripts are often wrapped within condemnation scripts. What is important about these descriptions are the ways in which offenders process and cope with how they have to think about themselves after their offenses and convictions, especially the processing of shame and the development of empathy. Empathy is the nuance of the redemption script that is most closely related to desistance. Participants experienced redemption through the treatment programs, specifically through the process of learning about their offending behavior. Redemption scripts also appeared when participants discussed their treatment groups as a source of community, and experiences of forgiveness and acceptance. Surprisingly, the forgiveness and acceptance of their crime was most frequently reported by sex offender persisters. Giving back to the community was also important, but not to all; rather sex offender persisters were most likely to feel redemption through this mechanism. Redemption

was expressed by desisters through empathy toward their victims and the agency that came along with finding ways to successfully change their lifestyle—notably all offenders were seeking this agency. As factors related to desistance for sex offenders, empathy and agency might be the most important.

## **REDEMPTION THROUGH TREATMENT**

The primary source of redemptive scripts for participants in this study was the sex offender treatment program. While treatment provided numerous ways in which participants sought and received redemption, it is important to note that one of the main philosophies of this modality is that the sex offender is not a “bad person,” but has “made a bad choice” (Morin and Levenson, 2002). Waldram’s (2009: 229) study of sex offenders in prison treatment demonstrated that “being transformed through treatment is evidence that one is definitely not evil.” Offenders in another study on prison treatment spoke of offenders’ “moral, therapeutic potential” after participating (Waldrum, 2010: 259). Treatment offered an experience that both humanized and redeemed sex offenders.

Treatment elicited redemption scripts reflecting the “true self” and this theme was consistent across desistance categories. Participants had varying interpretations of their “true self,” and without treatment they may not have found these interpretations. One of the most important facilitators of the discovery of this true self was the learning of empathy. Throughout their narratives, participants discussed the difference made in their lives and the ways they viewed themselves by learning how others felt. Although this was consistent across all desistance categories, the degree to which they emphasized empathy was related to desistance. Prior research suggests offenders link the development of empathy with desistance by seeking the intrinsic motivation to refrain from harming others (Colton et al.,

2009; Pithers, 1999), and in this study desisters were most likely to highlight the role of empathy in their lifestyle changes. The role of empathy in sex offender treatment and desistance are discussed further in Chapter 5.

All participants in this study were required to participate in and complete treatment during their prison term and subsequent community supervision. In most cases, the treatment program was a place for these offenders to gather with other similarly situated offenders and discuss challenges and problems that only they had experienced, and that they could all understand regardless of their background. Besides relying on the components of treatment that dealt with personal issues, such as cognitive distortions and deviant cycles, the members of the treatment group also relied on each other, to cope with the stresses and difficulties presented to them by their restrictions and, more importantly, to cope with the stigma experienced within the community. The latter issue most often arose through discussions of employment.

Their long-term attendance in group therapy produced a set of peers who understood their circumstances and who were also involved in some of the most intimate details of their lives. These groups proved to be sources of redemption because participants could “vent” their frustrations and difficulties with the label. More importantly, offenders discussed the personal redemption they experienced through treatment, which provided them with a better understanding of themselves, their identities, and their behavior, as well as how to cope with the condemnation cognitions experienced outside the treatment setting. Among this group, Learning about their offending cycles, and the causes and consequences of their offending, appeared to empower this group and provide them with a sense of agency. Despite having little control over what they could and could not do in their daily lives and having to be

“ever-vigilant” that they not fall into old patterns of behavior, offenders felt like this knowledge strengthened their ability to make choices. This knowledge and experience also enhanced offenders’ ability to forgive themselves, accept the consequences of their actions, and cope with their new trajectory in life.

***LEARNING ABOUT THE ETIOLOGY OF OFFENDING: “I’M NOT A PIECE OF SHIT”***

Research suggests learning about one’s pattern of sexual offending is essential to desistance, because those who understand their deviance demonstrate greater potential to actually stop (Colton et al., 2009; Kear-Colwell and Boer, 2000). Also, narratives about these patterns help offenders uncover the factors they associate with their criminal behavior, as well as what will assist in their cessation (Stevens, 2012). An emergent theme across desistance outcomes in the present study was that learning about offending behavior was empowering. In fact, this was the primary way in which participants expressed agency over their lives. They knew what was learned in treatment would help them to not reoffend in the future. It is important to recall that no participants in this study had committed a new sex offense. However, three offenders had returned to prison for committing other offenses and 19 had returned to prison at some point for violating stipulations related to their supervision in the community.

Desisters’ redemption through treatment scripts appeared to bring a simple sense of clarity to their previously out-of-control lives. As Donald succinctly stated, “[treatment] helped me reclassify what I thought of me in the same process. I’m not a piece of shit.” Edward (D) described how his drug addiction and his life involved in producing methamphetamine contributed to his offense. Treatment made him realize that he had engaged in sex with a teenage girl because drugs had lowered his inhibitions. Because of his



treatment, he knows that drugs would influence him in negative ways and he felt more in control by staying away from them, which was one reason he had chosen to live in a town hundreds of miles away from his hometown. By learning about the nature of his substance abuse problem, Edward was able to change how he viewed his “true self”:

Yeah. It’s not about just being a sex [offender] ... you know what? I’m an alcoholic first, a drug addict before I was ever a sex offender. Them were the contributing ... alcohol wasn’t so much a contributing factor to me acting out, but the drugs was the big part of me acting out. If I’m not doing the drugs, I’m not acting out. I’m not acting out in any way. Not just being a sex offender, but when you’re doing drugs, you’re doing everything else that’s illegal too.

Louis (D) reflected on the lessons learned in treatment, saying they assisted him in remaining crime free. He notes specific tools learned in the treatment program, including empathy. He could clearly describe the effects of his behavior on his victim. Louis knew he would never reoffend by:

Understanding and realizing how I made the victim feel. She probably hated herself and she was feeling all kinds of ways. I wouldn't want to put myself in that situation again to make anybody feel less of their self. I feel disgusting. I just wouldn't want to put myself in that situation and I keep that in the forefront of my mind to make sure that I don't reoffend or to even have the thoughts to kick in like. I keep that in there, I always keep my victim in the forefront of my mind and this is...just I can't have this. It just ain't happening.

While sex offender persisters were similar in that they found redemption through treatment scripts, they also experienced other barriers that hindered their agency. Benjamin (SOP)—who described the numerous struggles that led to his return to prison including those with his gender identity—detailed the lessons he learned in treatment about his offending patterns. These lessons were especially important to his redemption narrative because he abused drugs and alcohol for years to cope with his gender dysphoria, and because he

admitted he was also under the influence of controlled substances when he molested his daughter:

When people commit crimes there are reasons. Some people are just “This is what I want to do,” but a lot of times a drug and alcohol related incidents or whatever, you get yourself into a hole psychologically, like an alcoholic when they turn to alcohol to drown out their sorrows or to ease their pain or whatever. There are other issues involved. When I went through the program they said your type of offenses isn't about sex. It's about other issues. You have other issues in your life. As soon as you figure out what these other issues are then you can move on. At the time, I didn't know how to address life issues in a healthy manner. My communication skills were really bad. I was afraid to talk to people about certain things because they're sensitive things. Didn't want to be looked at as being a sissy or whatever.

Benjamin discussed in great detail how he had struggled with his masculinity in the context of his gender identity. Benjamin had been a Marine and still maintained his crew cut, and he wanted to pursue a career in personal training. He had even obtained a personal training certificate while in prison (even though he would not be able to use it until he was off parole because of employment restrictions). For Benjamin, beginning to deal with his life history, offending patterns, substance abuse and most importantly, his gender dysphoria, allowed him to confront his offending patterns. This also gave him hope to achieve his “true self.” Benjamin’s story is acknowledged as being quite unique and complex with its deep-seated issues related to his gender identity, but similar experiences of wading through a long history of life issues that contributed to offending behavior were present for most of the persisters and sex offender persisters in this study.

Some offenders discussed the specific tools they had learned in treatment and how they had applied them to real-life situations. Most persisters and sex offender persisters recognized a deficit in this ability. For example, Eric (SOP) emphasized the importance of

recognizing “seemingly irrelevant decisions”<sup>15</sup> (even if doing so did not prevent negative behaviors):

This is the one had got me [a violation]. Sandy [his ex-wife] don't like alcohol in her home, period. Her brother lives with her. Now, he's an alcoholic. After [he] moved out, he got to want me come over and watch the football games. I said sure. I didn't think about it at first, that he's an alcoholic. I just thought, sure, I got somebody to watch the game with. When he got over there, he brought alcohol with him. He got to offer me free beer and whatnot. I got to start drinking with him. It's a seemingly unimportant decision for me and I ended up in a bad situation real quick.

Eric's recognition of the cognitive distortion in this situation had not prevented him from becoming involved in other impulsive decisions, like assaulting his girlfriend and drinking most of a bottle of whiskey after a stressful day.

Jason (SOP) expressed the importance of learning empathy, but not in the same genuine ways as desisters. Empathy is characterized partly as the offender's ability to truly understand the victim's pain (Carich et al., 2003), and this complete understanding was not apparent in the narratives of sex offender persisters, who instead were most focused on getting others to understand their offending behavior. Recall that Jason was on lifetime supervision because of his repeated sexual offending. He felt like he had learned enough about himself and his issues to have more control: “I understand where I'm at. I know that I got more control over myself now. Basically, I don't even think that way, in terms of hurting somebody or doing something against somebody's will, that type of thing.”

Jason then qualified his statement by suggesting that he knew deep down he would have to continue working on his issues because he was not like the rest of the community. Jason thought that indefinitely attending sex offender treatment would be beneficial:

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<sup>15</sup> “Seemingly irrelevant decisions” is a treatment term used to describe cognitive interpretations that are made quickly and do not consider all the consequences associated with a particular behavior pattern (NIDA, 2013).

It's a refreshment of ... it keeps me on top of my plan, so to speak. It keeps me aware of ... I don't just relax and say, "Well, you know, I'm just like everybody else," which I'm not.

Raymond (SOP) described one example of how treatment had helped him learn to control his actions in public if there were children present. Throughout his narrative it became obvious that even the simplest tasks, such as grocery shopping, could have serious consequences if he was not aware of his surroundings:

You learn a lot of things. I don't think there's a session that I go to that I don't come away... We have a lot of conversations about don't go where you know that there probably is going to be kids or almost a certainty there's going to be kids there. I feel privileged that I can go grocery shopping because at first I couldn't go grocery shopping because there might be kids. I don't think there's a time that I go grocery shopping at all, or even today, when I leave here I'll be going there. There'll be kids there. You do your best to avoid. I think the best advice that I got came from Patricia [his PO] on how to deal with that at a grocery store. She said, "You see a kid, go to farthest corner of the store that you can. Get away from them. Don't make any attempt to have any conversation." You go to the next aisle and then circle back later on when that aisle is clear of kids.

Sex offender persisters felt "redeemed" by the fact that maybe one day they would be in complete control of their offending behavior, and the treatment program afforded this cognitive script.

In addition to learning about offending cycles and how to manage day-to-day life situations, it was common for participants to relearn their core beliefs. A common element of Maruna's (2001) redemption script is the identification of one's core beliefs that are linked with conventionality and law abiding behavior. A primary goal of sex offender treatment is to identify and evaluate one's core beliefs as these are related to sexual offending, especially by learning empathy and morality (Morin and Levenson, 2002). Offenders in the persister and sex offender persister categories were most likely to express that they had changed

and/or reevaluated these values. This is not surprising, considering that offenders in these two groups experienced the most traumatic and dysfunctional lives. Mark (P) says:

[Treatment] taught me things, which I should have known when I was a kid. They taught us about things like core beliefs. You have an inkling around deep down inside of you that are directing your life in different ways. If you're not aware of them, you're running around acting in pretty weird ways and you don't know why. This explains why; it puts a piece of the puzzle together and so you give a little thought to that and it's like "Oh, okay."

Learning about the circumstances that led up to offending, learning about tools to make good decisions, and relearning core beliefs provided all participants the means by which to redeem themselves from the image of the pathological sex offender stereotype, even if they actually fit this stereotype (i.e. SOPs). The education about the impacts of their family histories and compulsive behavior gave offenders, particularly sex offender persisters, more optimism about their ability to control their deviant behavior. However, it is not clear why these participants did not successfully apply these skills. It is possible that at the time of interviews they had so much to overcome that they were not near the point of desistance on their offending spectrum (King, 2013; Rungay, 2004). It is also possible that they lacked complete readiness for the change necessary for desistance, as Pithers (1999) argues knowledge is not enough unless it is accompanied by motivation.

#### ***FORGIVENESS AND ACCEPTANCE***

Forgiveness of one's own transgressions is associated with successful identity transformation (Day, Gerace, Wilson, and Howells, 2008; Hall and Fincham, 2006; Maruna, 2001). Forgiveness is a process by which negative emotions and cognitions are replaced with more positive ones (Enright and Gassin, 1992). Treatment goals emphasize ridding oneself of negative associations. However, without positive cognition replacements, the link between forgiveness and desistance will be unsuccessful (Ward and Stewart, 2003). Others suggest

treatment goals should serve a higher-order, meaningful function by focusing on self-forgiveness, which will improve the long-term desistance of offenders (Day et al., 2008). Self-forgiveness is the purposeful positive transformation of attitudes toward oneself (Dillon, 2001), and it results in the motivation to change behavior (Day et al., 2008).

Another element of the “treatment as redemption” story was the frequency with which forgiveness entered the narratives of offenders in this study, but did not appear in ways consistent with Maruna’s characterization. In Maruna’s study, offenders who expressed feelings of forgiveness and acceptance were the most likely to desist. However, in this study, forgiveness and acceptance most often appeared in the scripts of sex offender persisters. The fact that sex offender persisters were most likely to include scripts related to forgiveness and to accept their crimes may suggest they have not actually fully embraced the components of forgiveness related to their deviant sexual histories. It is also possible that the forgiveness and acceptance scripts were not present in desisters’ narratives because they had already self-forgiven. Forgiveness is facilitated by perspective-taking skills (Day et al., 2008), and since desisters were more likely than others to include empathy in their narratives, forgiveness was no longer a feature of their story. In contrast, sex offender persisters consistently discussed aspects of forgiveness. Fred (SOP), who had returned to prison for a violation after the *Phase 2* interview, described how the treatment group helped him forgive himself:

This is where group comes in because I went through a shitload of guilt, which any sane person would, and you got the shame factor. The hardest thing I ever had to do in my life, absolute hardest, was forgive myself, because I wanted the internal punishment. I punished myself viciously. I was starving myself, not drinking anything, just punished ... That wasn't working. That's wasn't working for me because then when I truly forgave myself, I just didn't want to. I didn't deserve it. I did not deserve it, but I knew if I was going to take one more step in the direction I want to take, I have to, and it wasn't an overnight thing. It doesn't, "Okay. Great. I'm better now." It's a long, enduring process. Now, I can talk about it. I can [go on] without having the emotional distress of shame and guilt and frustration and hate and

everything bombarding me because I have forgiven myself, and talking about it helps me.

Peter (SOP) discussed acceptance as an important mechanism in learning who he was and how to behave:

You've got to accept the fact of what you are and who you are, and you've got something you've got to deal with. You've got to talk to people about it, and you've got to figure out who to talk to and what kind of counseling they have to get into. I took from the past to now, and the way I looked at myself in the past, and I was some kind of an animal that really didn't care about myself. Didn't matter, as long as I got satisfied with ... not just sex, but alcohol, just running around being free and doing whatever I wanted to do. That's the main deal right there, is ... a person can't do what they want to do if they're going to be in a situation like that. They've got to have help.

Forgiveness is also related to one's moral compass (Konstam, Chernoff and Deveney, 2001). As sex offender persisters are relearning core beliefs, they are also developing their moral values. It is likely that for sex offender persisters, the effort to translate forgiveness into an effective lifestyle change is ongoing, whereas desisters have already successfully undertaken this process. Sex offender persisters might be exhibiting self-forgiveness, in which one does not perceive having done anything wrong but claims to forgive oneself (Hall and Fincham 2006). Acknowledgement of the offense typically initiates guilt and remorse, which must be experienced prior to self-forgiveness (Hall and Fincham, 2006). It is also possible self-forgiveness is not attainable for those who have committed the most heinous offenses (Hall and Fincham, 2006). Hall and Fincham (2006) suggest that when a crime is too horrendous the offender cannot reach true self-forgiveness and is actually exhibiting pseudo-self-forgiveness. The ability to forgive is also related to one's emotional and cognitive style (Konstam et al., 2001). If one has too many deficits in cognition then one may not be able to forgive. It is possible in this study that the emergence of forgiveness and

acceptance in the narratives of sex offender persisters originated in attempts to assert agency and conventionality to the interviewer (see Presser, 2009).

***TREATMENT AS COMMUNITY: “YOU DON’T FEEL LIKE YOU’RE ALONE”***

Maruna (2011) argued that for re-entry to be effective it must involve more than the physical return of people to the community. It must also include a “symbolic element of moral inclusion” (Maruna, 2011: 4), where offenders can expect to achieve things like redemption, forgiveness, or acceptance by others. Although Maruna applied this concept to general offender re-entry, it has important implications for the sex offender community, who may be excluded. The “moral inclusion of sex offenders” creates a “shared reality” that no citizen wants to have (Maruna, 2011). Given this fact, participants sought such symbolic inclusion through their treatment groups. Treatment provided them an opportunity for redemption through weekly meetings and gave the sense of community they could not otherwise obtain. Nicholas (ED) liked knowing he was not isolated in his feelings or experiences: “You know you’re not the only one ... you don’t feel like you’re alone.”

Ronald (ED) valued the group because it was a place he could talk about his feelings:

Again, it gives me a place to talk about it. It gives me a place to vent. I can see that there's other people having problems like I do. That helps a lot, the fact that you know that there are other guys who are going through the same kind of crap you are. Although it's still crap, it's just better to know that...

Treatment provided a setting where participants could compare and contrast experiences, ultimately leading them to find that there were others out there “worse” than them (this type of “othering” is discussed in both Chapters 5 and 6). Harry (P) described the importance of his treatment group while in prison for understanding how the sex offender label applied to him and how he could differentiate himself from worse offenders:



[Treatment] was [important], because, sometimes you can't talk to certain people about the things that you've been through or about the things that really bother you. I think that when you go into group that is your time to be open and honest and maybe express some of the stuff you have on your chest. But I was, I guess learning from other inmates on good behavior and how to cope with certain anger times and ask what they was going through. Just knowing how it is when they are a registered sex offender and how to deal with different kinds of issues. It's just [like] discrimination. I mean, some people deal with it hard because I mean different sex offenders is [from] forceful rape to indecent exposure and some people feel that they didn't do anything to [their victims]. It was, it's like, just people who view it as like one big harsh or heinous crime and like me I mean, I got in trouble for sleeping with a minor...

Learning about others' offense patterns and choices to minimize or deny them taught participants the "true" nature of sex offending and how to cope with the challenges of being labeled. By listening to others' stories, participants were able to relate to challenges those others faced, as well as learning how to detect deception. Many regarded this latter tool as one they applied directly to themselves when sensing triggers associated with relapse.

Michael (SOP) relied on treatment not only to help him with his sexual addiction, but also to cope with being labeled a sex offender in society. He also valued treatment as a place where he could be completely honest and open, and if he wasn't, others would hold him accountable. His narrative also details how difficult some sex offenders' lives really are, including his own:

Again, it's ... my experience has been that when they really opened up and started talking about being molested when they were young, growing up in a promiscuous situation, neighborhoods and all the sex that went on, most of them were addictive sex addicts, and when they lost their confidence, it was easy to go to children, and I'm not saying that that's all right. I'm saying there needs to be a program to help people like that, a 12-step ... actually, I've probably gotten as much out of my 12-step programs, because I now sponsor two people, as I did my therapy because that was the first place I was able to open up and be totally honest about what I did and what happened. I think the program I'm in right now has, the group program, has that same quality. You can say just about anything. Well, you can say anything. If you're off track, the people will tell you you're off track and help you through their experiences. That was the other part the 12 step does. It helps you through their experience.

Desisters and persisters were most likely to discuss the difficulties they faced in listening to the offending histories of men who targeted children. This narrative might be indicative of a lack of deviant sexual patterns related to children, or of their understanding that their own crimes were related to other issues, like substance abuse. This theme suggests that desisters and persisters do not fully adopt the sex offender label, and their reactions to offenders who do adopt it affirm their moral goodness. Nevertheless, participants in these categories remarked how important treatment was for them in understanding how they fit within the “true” spectrum of sexual offending. Since they felt their crimes were less severe than the stereotype, this may explain why feeling “condemned” by society negatively affected them more than others.

#### **REDEMPTION THROUGH OTHERS: “I DON’T VIEW YOU AS A BAD PERSON”**

Although participants felt condemned by many in the community, they simultaneously expressed redemption scripts when describing some relationships with family, friends, and intimate partners. In all these scripts, the fact that the support person did not judge them, seeing past their labels as sex offenders, helped them feel like there was hope to return to “normal” and become better people. Having support networks that are not judgmental is important to sex offenders’ desistance (Robbers, 2009). A common characteristic of desisters and emerging desisters was the central role of important and conventional bonds they had with someone meaningful. Persisters also had bonds with family, friends, and intimate partners, but these actors were not individuals to whom they felt responsible. Sex offender persisters did not have as many social supports, but most sought out redemption through a single entity they felt had not abandoned them.

Desisters were most likely to have stable family and friend relationships prior to and after their sex offense conviction. Also, no desisters in this study had offended against a member of their family, possibly protecting them from this potential barrier. In lieu of returning to his family, Edward (D) relied on his new support system at the transitional house. In fact, when asked about his family, Edward stated, "I have a family here, you know what I mean? They've treated me [as family] since I got out of prison, see." Edward felt like his new family at the transitional house accepted him, which was important because he recognized that his family, while supportive, was dysfunctional in ways that would impede his progress, likely by getting him back into drugs. Edward more specifically described how his relationship with one of the transitional house's benefactors, Steve, really helped him. When asked if the sex offender label made a difference in his relationship with Steve, Edward stated:

No, because when I called him, I called him also when I got out, and I apologized to him. Steve says, "Edward, who am I to judge you?" He said, "I'm not a judge." He says, "Only God can judge you, and if He's forgiven you, why can't I?"

Edward then went on further to discuss how the relationship with Steve was important because his own family relationships were somewhat strained. Edward valued the relationship he had re-established with his family, and by being geographically distant he was able to work on his own issues without the added stress of his previous family dynamics. The sentiment that sex offenders had made a bad choice and were not bad people was an important part of being accepted by others in their social networks. This frequently appeared in narratives about employers who looked past their criminal history, service providers offering assistance, and new intimate partners. For example, Lawrence (P) informed his new girlfriend about his criminal history, and:

She said “that's your past” and she goes, “you know, it does happen to people,” because I told her, you know, I laid it all to her and told her exactly every detail, you know, what happened. She just told me, “You know, things happen.” She goes, you know, I don't view you as a bad person, you made bad choices.

Sex offender persisters more frequently discussed the roles of intimate partners in their redemption as the one person who would accept them. Half of sex offender persisters reported being in long-term relationships or finding love after their convictions. Jason (SOP) had been married for over 30 years to his wife Hattie. Despite the most recent sex offense having been against her granddaughter, she had stayed with Jason. Jason felt this devotion was very important for his personal journey, especially her forgiveness and their experiences when he felt he was at his lowest:

She had seen me as frail and kind of person that we all are. You can make mistakes. But she had; I think, now have more confidence in me than before because coming from zero and making sure that we are able to survive, I think she had more confidence in me now. When I look in her blue eyes, and she does have blue eyes, it makes me feel pretty good. The fact that we stuck through the hard times and we can talk about things that we never could talk about in our 30's, you know.

No matter whether sex offender persisters had an intimate partner, they all identified one person in their lives who provided them acceptance and support. It is important to recall the incredibly complicated natures of the families and offenses of those in the sex offender persister category. This contrasts with the lives of desisters and those of most emergent desisters, whose family lives were more stable. Michael (SOP), who had been married to his wife for 40 years, also recognized the importance of his relationship with his sister. Michael had lost most of his family contacts due to offending against his daughter, and his wife had lost most of hers because she had stayed with him. Michael (SOP) valued his sister's support, especially because she had been one of his victims as a juvenile:

The oldest sister and I have always been very, very close. It took her a couple of years of hearing all of the stories and so on and so forth before she could accept it and

realize because we were so close growing up. When she confronted me, we talked about it, and I was just honest with her, so she's been very supportive. Since my younger sister, when I was 11, was one of my victims, I was not allowed to talk to her those seven years. We are talking again now, and she's ... she and I had a long talk before all of this broke [his offense against his daughter], in legal terms, and found out that my uncle was molesting her, and so were the boys in the neighborhood. She knew more about it at her age of seven or eight than I did at 11. She said, "I understand, and I understand the sex addict part of it, and we just have to look out for each other."

Paul (SOP) had offended against three of his five daughters and had no contact with any of his family except one brother. With both parents deceased, Paul had to rely on his brother for his financial and emotional needs. In the *Phase 1* interview, Paul had hoped to live with his step-brother, who had also been supportive of him, but that relationship had been strained by the time he was released from prison. Paul described how his brother helped him:

Sure my brother's helping me out. I mean, he goes and gets the groceries. He don't ask me for no money or anything like that. He's paying the house payment. He's paying the bills. I do try to give him a couple hundred dollars a month to throw in on the bills, but he never tells me how much they are or anything else. My cell phone gets paid and I have no idea how much it's ... He doesn't want me to get in trouble.

As often as participants felt condemned by their social networks and the overall community, they sought or received redemption through at least one actor in their lives. This was most salient for sex offender persisters who had the fewest contacts, but were desirous of rebuilding relationships. The redemption scripts also highlighted the important role non-judgmental actors may play in assisting the most "condemned" sex offenders in rebuilding identities that support desistance.

## **REDEMPTION BY GIVING BACK**

An important characteristic of redemption scripts is giving back to the community (Maruna, 2001). Some suggest “altruistic activity” in offenders will lead to meaningful change (Toch, 2010), but this was not a consistent finding in this study. Scholars suggest that altruism should provide self-worth and agency (Stevens, 2010), but it is likely that sex offenders are barred from some of the opportunities to give back to the community. Further reflected in the concept of altruism is civic engagement. Uggen and colleagues (2004) discuss the importance of offenders’ engagement in civic life as a means of reintegration. They also note that sex offenders might face challenges with wanting to give back to a community that may not want them (Uggen et al., 2004). The findings in this study confirm the existence of conflict between wanting to give back to the community and fearing being rejected by it. This dichotomy suggests this redemption script may need to be refined when considering the circumstances of sex offenders.

First, all offenders (including those in *Phase 1*) said their reason for participating in the present study was that they hoped it might help people in similar situations. Many stated they hoped the research would make change in some of the policies they felt were hindering their lives, and they said participation was worthwhile if it helped one person. Participants expressed feeling redeemed through their services to others, especially to the sex offender community. Participants felt validation and enhanced their self-worth when they were assisting others in sex offender treatment, drug treatment, the parole office, or even prison. These efforts to improve the circumstances of other similarly situated offenders improved participants’ self-esteem and, as one offender noted, kept the treatment material fresh and maintained accountability for progress in treatment. The idea of giving back not only makes

sex offenders whole, but also keeps the reasons they are helping (namely their behavior leading up to the crime) in the forefront of their minds.

Second, most participants did not emphasize the relevance of giving back to the community in general. Most desisters did not feel like the community had afforded them much opportunity for civic engagement and were somewhat cynical in their approach to community life. It may be for the desister category that the idea of giving back reminds them of the resentment they feel toward a community that has not embraced them because of their offenses (Uggen et al., 2004). Uggen and colleagues (2004: 277) remark, “When stigma and rejection are the dominant experience, the potentially restorative benefits of civic participation are lost.”

Contrary to expectations, sex offender persisters were most likely to report that helping others was essential to their identity transformation. However, it became clear through their narratives that their version of giving back to the community was not entirely altruistic. Eric (SOP) described how helping people in his treatment program also held him accountable:

When I’m actually helping somebody else out, that makes me feel good. When they present their problems that they’re having at the time, I give them input about it. At the same time, if I had the same problem, it’s hard for me to do the wrong thing because I’d already gave out the right ... It’s kind of keeps you in check a little bit with yourself because ... you told one ... somebody to do something, you don’t want to do the opposite. If you’re working on helping somebody else, you’re working on helping yourself.

Giving back to the community is a common characteristic of desisting offenders in general, but with sex offenders the importance of charity was most frequently discussed by sex offender persisters as essential to their transformation. This may be due to the fact that this category of offenders was least likely have other outlets that helped them provide

meaning or sense in their lives. The incredibly complicated nature of sex offender persisters' family and friend networks, offense histories, and treatment needs is likely a factor in this theme's contradictory presence in their narratives.

### ***REDEMPTION AND IDENTITY TRANSFORMATION***

For sex offenders, the experience of redemption on a large scale seems tenuous at best. An important aspect of the redemptive narrative to consider in this study is the actual discussion of transformation. While treatment, others, and altruistic activity appear as expansions of the *Making Good* framework to the sex offender population, there is some evidence that the redemptive self does appear, but in slightly different ways. Redemption narratives are highlighted by changes in one's lifestyle that are linked to an ultimate change in identity (Giordano et al., 2002; Maruna, 2001). Some suggest that desistance will occur more naturally if both "social and subjective factors" are steering one away from crime, and desistance is "less likely if there is dissonance between these areas" (King, 2013: 318). That is, there is a change in both the individual and the environment that makes positive change more conducive. Sex offenders may experience barriers to social and subjective factors because of society's unwillingness to accept them. Dissonance one experiences between these factors has negative effects for one's ability to take control of one's life and offending.

King (2013: 331) suggests:

Central to the concept of agency in desistance is the notion of intentional self-change. However, this should not be interpreted as the individual simply deciding what it is that they want to do or who they want to become, but rather it should entail an understanding of how the individual devises workable means of achieving these aspirations and, moreover, of how they determine realistic, yet desistance-focused, alternatives under condition of institutional uncertainty and structural change.

One redemption script that distinguished between desistance and persistence was emergent in this study. Desisters and emerging desisters showed that they would not reoffend



because they had *changed* their mindset, as opposed to sex offender persisters who discussed themselves as *changing* and emphasized the decision to change, but could not demonstrate an actual transformation. This finding contrasts with Maruna's (2001) assertion that desistance is a maintenance process and that offenders must constantly work at developing this prosocial identity. In this study, desisters discussed how they had changed their lifestyle in more ways than just those that discouraged their sex offending behavior. They were able to assert their agency over their lives by confidently declaring that they could never return to sexual offending because treatment lessons support life changes, not just criminogenic ones. On the other hand, persisters and sex offender persisters expressed redemption scripts related to the process of recovery and exerted agency through their decisions to change and refrain from sexual offending. Persisters, however, were not able to demonstrate the same willpower over their general offending patterns.

**DESISTANCE: REDEMPTION THROUGH A "COMPLETE CHANGE IN LIFESTYLE"**

Desisters' narratives indicated a complete change, a shift away from lifestyles and attitudes conducive to general offending, mainly through the influence of empathy training. The importance of changes in thinking and daily habits has been highlighted by other researchers as important to desistance for offenders (Haigh, 2009). Further, desisters' narratives confidently described the nature of this change as being holistic and not just related to situations where they had previously been at risk for reoffending. Desisters described a complete change of self and of the attitudes that made offending possible in the first place. Louis (D) described a complete change in his attitude toward life. In fact, he felt like all offenders would benefit from the treatment he had received:

Louis: The principles; I utilize the principles. I try to put people in my own ... Put myself in somebody else's shoes. I want to treat people like I want to be treated.

It's like I try to work on myself every day. The one person would say my primary purpose is to work on myself. I do my best to work on myself so I can treat people like they want to be treated and like I want to be treated. You know, you've got to work on your thoughts first and your behaviors every day. It's an everyday routine.

KK: It sounds like you've transferred it to your whole life and not just offending or whatever?

Louis: Yes, that's what it is. I think I'm a lot different. I think of view myself, I don't think about myself. My fiancé thought about by my selfish ways and my selfish thoughts that I wanted. My problem is I always want what I want when I want it, but now I don't think that way. I'm not a selfish person anymore and I've dealt with a lot my feelings and a lot of behavior. I've dealt with a lot of that and I think it made me a better man to understand life more. To understand the reason for being here on this earth.

In Louis's narrative he moved from discussing the value of everyday, habitual thinking in his desistance to allowing himself cognitive room to think about his life in the bigger picture. Ronald's (ED) personal transformation after completing treatment was clearly articulated and showed the influence of empathy on his change process:

First of all, I have a completely different outlook on life, seriously. I'm no longer self-centered. It's more important to do for others than it is to do for myself. I think that's part of the biggest issue. The fact that I can deal with life in a grown-up manner, I guess, would be the best way to put it. I understand it [his disease] fully now. That's where it's at. I feel like it's defeated. I do. I feel it's over. I look forward every day. Again, I'm going to tell you right now, I live every day to its fullest. I live every day like it's the last day of my life. I do. I live every day like it's the last day of my life. I always remind myself it's the first day of the rest of my life. I try and put the past in the past, learn from it, but it's not something I got to carry around with me. I don't have to tote that stuff around.

Constant comparative analysis confirmed the distinction between offenders' descriptions of "being changed" and those of "changing." Persisters' narratives about lifestyle and attitude change are consistent with what is already believed about desistance—that everyone will desist eventually (Sampson and Laub, 2003). Persisters described a change in attitude related to their offending histories. Most of these descriptions included extrinsic

motivation for change. For example, Kevin (P) stated he was getting “too old” for the kinds of things he used to do, and at age 62 he thought this would be his last time in prison:

Yes, I’m still doing the time, but this is it for me, this is my last rodeo. I just feel there’s some change, and I just can’t do it no more. I done matured a little bit, I done got older. I think a little bit better. I make better choices. It’s been over time. Most of them taught me a lot, the gang members, and mostly you got to give respect; that will go a long way in life. I need to respect authority and all that. Now, I do. I don’t like people making choices for me; that was never one of my things having people making choices for me, by being here all the choices is being made for me; when to go to bed, when to wake up, when to go eat.

Lawrence (P) also related more extrinsic changes and felt that changing his residence and who he associated with would be important for him to remain out of prison. Prior to prison, Lawrence had hung around the “wrong” crowd, used marijuana heavily, and never had a steady job. Since his return home he had enrolled in school, and he described his life as mainly “at home.” Some of this was due to the negative reactions he experienced in his small town and also an injury from years prior that had nearly immobilized him<sup>16</sup>:

Keep my set of you know, of what could happen if I don't stay on the right path and good support system. That's always, that's always a plus, I mean, just for anybody, support, you know, support for people, even though I'm back in the same area. The people, I mean, they say I have to stay get away from people, places, and things. It's not really like that for me at all. You know, I know who to avoid and who to hang out with, so I really haven't hang out with anybody since I've been out. Not really. That I'm just ready to get off of it and finally live a life instead of having to be go here go there, and do this, and do that. Maybe finally I'll be done with it and find out what it's like; I'll have to do all that stuff no more.

Despite Lawrence’s recent lifestyle adjustments, he seemed tentative about maintaining the positive change, mainly because he described himself as lonely.

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<sup>16</sup> Lawrence was in a near-fatal car wreck that broke his pelvis and legs. He had numerous procedures to repair the damage but still suffered from significant pain and walked with a limp. This was additional background disadvantage he endured while trying to remain crime free.

Sex offender persisters could also identify the importance of changing one's day-to-day activities, but were stymied from successfully doing so by their sexual deviance.

Raymond (SOP) described how a change in his lifestyle was essential to his not reoffending. He especially felt the importance of always keeping tabs on his thinking patterns to ensure he did not sexually reoffend. It is important to note that Raymond returned to prison three times between the *Phase 1* and *Phase 2* interviews, all three times for exhibiting grooming behaviors at the library. In this excerpt, Raymond discusses the steps he takes to avoid reoffending:

I think I've learned a lot and I have to be ever vigilant in the way I handle myself. Every day when I walk out the door of my house, I never know what to expect. I have to remember all of these things, like I don't go in a city park, sit at a park bench by myself and read a newspaper for an hour. You get a parole violation for that or a technical violation. You don't go any place where you knowingly know that there are going to be kids there. If there are kids there, you avoid them at all cost. Those things you have to constantly...be aware of your thoughts, what your thinking pattern is, what triggers you might experience or what triggers are out there. You have to really examine or continually examine your ... just your being, human being. View yourself as a human being that has made some mistakes, made some poor choices, made some better choices, some different choices.

Benjamin (SOP), who interviewed while in prison, expressed that he had learned in treatment that he needed a complete lifestyle change in order to accomplish his goals and remain in the community. He reflected upon a former friend at the bike shop he frequented:

Kind of like the owner of the bike shop, he says "I'm looking at you now, I'm not looking at you then." I have to have that same standpoint. I have to look at myself now. Yeah, I'm back in, but I'm also trying to provide a better future for myself. I know that things are possible. As long as I keep telling myself they're possible, they will be. I can't fall back into that boo-hoo, woe is me attitude like when I was out and I violated my parole. Things are going to happen, things are not always going to go my way, and I have to accept that.

## **PERSISTENCE: THE “DECISION TO CHANGE”**

The actual decision to change has been highlighted as a primary component for enacting change (Byrne and Trew, 2008; Haigh, 2009; Paternoster and Bushway, 2009). For example, in a study of youthful offenders, Haigh (2009) found that all acknowledged the “only way to truly change” was to make the conscious decision to do so. An announcement that one intends to change is linked to increased likelihood that the change will occur, because the decision represents the acceptance of a new self (Markus and Nurius, 1986). This study produced some divergent results. Most participants asserted that the motivation to change had to come from within the person. The actual mechanism for this decision to change varied by desistance outcome. Desisters discussed their change process in past tense, while sex offender persisters were most likely to describe the actual moment that led to their decision to change, which was an ongoing process. In theorizing how this relates to desistance, Paternoster and Bushway (2009) identified the decision to change as the “crystallization of discontent.” This moment occurs when people are so unhappy with their choices that they see a version of their “feared self.” Following the feared self, a new, replacement self is acquired. However, this is where a disconnect between the two selves occurred for participants in this study, most of whom recognized that they feared being the reviled sex offender. For sex offender persisters, the ability to see someone beyond the feared self and actually acquire a new self was much more challenging.

Fred’s (SOP) narrative was consistent with Paternoster and Bushway’s (2009) description; however his was not yet linked with desistance. Fred saw his feared self as the same man who molested him as a child:

You're either going to be a better person or a worse person, one of the two. I looked into the metaphorical mirror, the man in the mirror, looked at myself, truly at myself, and it scared me to death...and really began looking, truly, intently looking, and when

I saw who I had become, it scared me. I'm like, "This is not who I am." I call it a monster because a guy named Jerry molested me for three years when I was a child. By that time, I knew I was a different person. Six years later, I was a much different person. I wanted to be the man I was supposed to have been beforehand, and I knew in my heart there was this awesome amount of love to give because I found it again. I liked who I was. Of all places, in prison, I had a guard come to me and ask me, "I want to know what you're taking. Every time I see you, you have a smile on your face. I want to know why." I said, "I'm happy." "How can you be happy? You're in prison." "Because I'm happy in here." That was a boost. If guards are seeing this and saying this to me, I'm on the right path. I'm making better choices in my own self, and I'm becoming the person I should have been that I was before. That let me know I'm changing my life. I'm becoming a better person.

Sex offender persisters were most likely to describe the decision to change as being followed by a process of recovery. While the change process was clear to all sex offenders who had been through treatment, sex offender persisters relied on this "recovery process" to redeem their offending behavior in the same ways that other types of addicts do. The recovery concept possibly implied a lifelong search for a replacement identity. For Benjamin (SOP), the possibility of being his feared self existed in the potential for reoffending:

You're always going to be in recovery. You're always going to be rehabilitated, because, it could be 10, 20 years down the road and maybe something happens, something happens if you don't monitor your thoughts and your feelings and your behaviors; there's always, always going to be a chance to re-offend. You've got to understand that. If you don't understand that then chances of you re-offending are probably going to be great, because you're kidding yourself that "oh, I went through the class and I went through the program and I'm fine."

Desisters emphasized different aspects when discussing their decisions to change. Edward (D) felt that prison had been the catalyst to his decision, and he had felt even more motivated when he had been released to the transitional housing where he had to "prove" himself to the support group:

Everybody deserves a second chance. I've only been to prison once, and I'll never go back, you know what I mean? Drugs was what created my problems, so I've been clean and sober for eight years now so ... But when I came out of prison, I told them I'm not going to be the same guy. I told the administrator, "Listen, I'm not them other

guys.” And look where I’m at today...but if a guy doesn’t want to be any kind of rehabilitation, he ain’t going to do it. It’s a want that each person has to have, I think.

In Edward’s expression that he was going to be “the same guy,” he was referring to his drug addiction rather than sex offending. He had access to a potential identity that other sex offender persisters did not have access to. Stanley (D) discussed the importance of deciding to stop self-pity, take action instead, and redefine oneself. He also mentioned the importance of having someone in one’s corner to offer that chance:

At first, I was terrible ashamed of what I have done, but after a while, I just decide to myself I’m not going to let people make ... I’m not going to let someone else think they know me better than I do, because I know who I am. I know we’re not above. I know that’s not who I am. But there’s just this label and obviously, it makes things a little more difficult to get stuff going again. But there’s just the decision that you can either sit around forever feeling sorry for yourself or you can go out there and tell people that’s not who you are. Like it’s taken it long, but there’s someone out there that’s willing to give you a chance. Obviously, there are some places you can’t work in like school or university, but there is definitely someone out there who is willing to give you a chance and it’s going to take a while to find it, but just keep sticking with it; you’re going to find it paid off.

Stanley was able to connect his decision to change with the moment he realized he did not have to allow his shame to make him cower in front of others. The option of being someone who did not “feel sorry” for himself assisted him with his ongoing desistance in the follow-up period. In this analysis, the distinction between the change and the decision became apparent and distinct between desisters and persisters. In contrast to Maruna’s (2001) idea that desistance is “going,” the narratives of this sample of sex offenders suggested that it may be the opposite. The conditioning effects of treatment and structure may influence this difference and will be explored further in Chapters 5 and 6.

## ***CONCLUSIONS***

In summary, this chapter detailed the nature of condemnation and redemption scripts as expressed by a group of sex offenders categorized according to a spectrum of desistance. Findings both confirm the applicability of the *Making Good* framework and support an extension of specific concepts to highlight the unique experiences of sex offenders. Condemnation scripts were characterized by a sense of being “doomed to be labeled” because of the sex offender identity and regardless of the redemption they experienced through treatment. The public perception of sex offenders as the stereotype impacted the types of jobs participants could obtain, their interactions with others, and their involvement in the community. In order to redeem themselves, sex offenders relied on treatment not only for the tools and education it provided, but also as a community in which they were accepted and could support others in return. There were differences between desistance categories in the way this impacted their lives, but treatment was a salient factor in sex offender redemption overall. Also, despite sex offender persisters being excluded from existing family or friend networks, many found redemption through at least one person. These meaningful relationships may be important sources of support for offenders in treatment, who also have to deal with issues of abandonment and isolation. Finally, the importance of the actual change process was highlighted in the narratives of offenders, but not in expected ways. Desisters expressed confidence that their entire lifestyle had changed, and this was influenced by empathy. On the other hand, persisters and sex offender persisters reflected upon their decision to change but could not present transformational narratives. Overall, sex offenders in this study described a juxtaposition of condemnation and redemption that warrants further exploration.



## **CHAPTER 5: ROLE OF SEX OFFENDER TREATMENT IN DESISTANCE**

The public perceives sex offenders as being not amenable to treatment because they are viewed as “incurable” offenders (Hudson, 2005; Matravers, 2003). Despite this public viewpoint, most criminal justice and psychology professionals agree that ongoing CBT is an effective way to address issues related to sexual offending (Abel et al., 1984; Rogers et al., 2011). It is common in this offender population to have extrinsic reasons for entering treatment, such as a court order or parole stipulation, that eventually lead to intrinsic motivation to change (Hudson, 2005). In the study state, sex offenders are required to participate in the treatment program, in prison as a condition of their release, and as an aftercare component. All sex offenders sentenced to the Department of Corrections Division of Adult Institutions must participate in the Missouri Sex Offender Program (MoSOP).<sup>17</sup> Offenders are admitted to the program approximately 12 months prior to their conditional release date. The MoSOP program is a nine-month therapeutic community housed in a separate wing of a maximum security institution.<sup>18</sup> There are four wings in the facility, each housing 60 offenders. During the program, sex offenders work through two phases. In the initial phase (approximately three months), offenders are evaluated, undergo risk and needs assessments, and begin group psychoeducational classes. In the second phase, offenders move to intensive group therapy with 10 to 12 other inmates. In this phase, offenders engage in CBT and educational courses.

The MoSOP program is similar to other CBT programs that attempt to reduce sexual recidivism risk by identifying cognitive distortions and deviant patterns associated with

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<sup>17</sup> Pursuant to Revised Missouri Statute 589.040.

<sup>18</sup> This description refers to the male sex offender program at Farmington Correctional Center (FCC). Females undergo a separate treatment program at the Women’s Eastern Reception and Diagnostic Center in Vandalia, MO (WERDC). Upon release however, in some rural areas, men and women participate in co-ed aftercare treatment.

offending, conditioning deviant arousal, and identifying deficits in social intimacy (Yates, 2009). CBT programs also include skills building, teaching social skills, management of negative affective states, and problem solving skills (Yates, 2009). Empathy training and moral deficits building are common elements of most CBT programs for sex offenders (Carich et al., 2003; Hanson, 2003). Research suggests that successful application of empathy provides the motivation for offenders, who will never want to hurt others again, to remain crime-free (Pithers, 1999).

MoSOP also offers treatment in the therapeutic community setting, which helps offenders “practice what they preach” and affords them a daily mirror in which to look at themselves. Group therapy also holds the offender accountable for his treatment progress and day-to-day activities by integrating other offenders’ input as a system of checks and balances. The MoSOP treatment program adopts the notion that a sex offender is really what Morin and Levenson (2002) call a “good person who made a bad choice.” Research also supports this idea. In a qualitative study of sex offenders in prison treatment, Tewksbury and Copes (2012) found that participants felt they were not truly sex offenders, rather they are people who had made mistakes. This interpretation allows for the possibility of redemption and the adoption of a conventional persona (Waldram, 2010). This concept is also consistent with a reintegrative shaming approach, which focuses on “the evil of the act, and not the evil of the person” (McAlinden, 2007: 173).

The MoSOP prison program reported a 56.3% completion rate in 2012. An average of 1.28% of offenders who completed the program was convicted of a new sex offense within five years of release, whereas 4.92% of those who did not complete or refused to participate were likewise convicted (MoDOC Strategic Plan, 2012). In this study, only one offender

(Carlos, SOP) failed the program for lack of therapeutic gain, and he served the remainder of his prison term.

Following MoSOP and release into the community, offenders are required to participate in aftercare, which constitutes a third phase of MoDOC's therapeutic intervention. These programs are contracted at the local level, and offenders are directed to a therapist nearest their residence. Offenders attend group meetings at least once a week with between 10 and 12 other probationers and parolees. The length of time offenders are in treatment depends on their progress as deemed by the therapist. This program follows the therapeutic model outlined in Morin and Levenson's (2002) *The Road to Freedom*. This model is a non-adversarial approach that emphasizes the offender's rational decision-making and control over sexually deviant thoughts. The program helps offenders identify deviant thinking patterns and recall experiences from childhood that have affected behavior, and encourages the therapist to provide practical solutions for offenders to prevent the same chain of events that led to sexual offending. Offenders present a case summary to the group during which time other group members hold them accountable for the accurate detailing of their crimes and responsibility for their behavior. Over the course of their treatment, offenders complete a series of homework assignments, such as victim letters and safety plans, and they present their work to the group, all of which are critical components of the program.

The role of treatment in the desistance narratives of sex offenders has not been explored. Maruna (2001: 103) avoided sampling offenders and ex-offenders who were in treatment programs (primarily substance abuse programs) because they are immersed in a "language of reform." That is, their narratives would be rife with words and statements that would echo treatment language, and their own voice or perspective might be obscured.

Hudson (2005: 108) refers to this as “talking the talk.” In Hudson’s (2005) study of sex offenders in a CBT program, those who denied their crime “talked the talk” as a way to mask their actual engagement in treatment and appear to others as though they were achieving treatment goals. While an important distinction between Maruna’s caution and Hudson’s findings, the treatment mandate for the current sample means that it is essential to explore the narratives regardless of the potential “talk” or “language of reform.” With sex offenders, the self-narrative produced in treatment is a function of the protocol and the dynamics of the group setting (Waldram, 2008). This study gathered information about sex offenders’ perceptions of their own rehabilitation and reoffending as well as others. The benefit of seeking offenders’ interpretations of these ideas is that doing so will allow for evaluation of how are associated with success outcomes, as well as how they may be applied to real-life treatment (Garrett, Oliver, Wilcox, and Middleton, 2003; Levenson et al., 2009; Marshall et al., 2005; Maruna, 2012). In this study, the treatment “talk” employed by participants presented a way for them to discuss their crimes and frame their experiences in ways that could be easily presented to an interviewer. This “rehabilitative storytelling” may help offenders make sense of their criminal lives and understand how their experiences contribute to desistance (Maruna, 2001).

This chapter explores the role of treatment in the desistance process for sex offenders. First, I discuss the overall benefits of treatment perceived by the participants and how these benefits are related to the desistance patterns articulated in Chapter 3. Second, I asked participants if they felt rehabilitated and what their likelihood of reoffending was. During this questioning, I asked participants to describe what they thought it meant to be rehabilitated. Last, participants described what they thought it would take for others to avoid reoffending.

This final question regarding treatment was important because it elicited descriptions of goals shared by offenders, and highlighted the commonly perceived characteristics associated with desistance from sex offending.

### ***OVERALL PERCEIVED BENEFITS OF TREATMENT***

All participants in this study described the importance of attending treatment in terms of meeting goals of desistance. Many felt that treatment would assist them in “overcoming the disease” of sexual offending and allow them to control the deviant thoughts that could translate into negative emotions and behavior (Robbers, 2009). All participants reported learning or re-learning core beliefs, which is a fundamental component of the treatment protocol. Core beliefs are developed at an early age and are the essence of how people see themselves and what they know to be true about the world around them, such as the idea that it is wrong to harm others (Morin and Levenson, 2002). For individuals with disadvantaged upbringings core beliefs can be influenced by experiencing trauma, including sexual abuse or substance use, that make the adoption of conventional norms challenging (Morin and Levenson, 2002; Rumgay, 2004).

Empathy played a major role in the MoSOP treatment program and appears throughout participants’ narratives. Other research has highlighted the importance of empathy training as a component of successful sex offender treatment (Colton et al., 2009; Day, 1999). As noted in Chapter 4, empathy appeared consistently in the narratives of desisters, and may play a key role in the motivation to change. In addition to empathy training, participants felt that a change in thinking patterns, or mindset, was crucial to reforming their lives. This is consistent with the tenets of CBT, which emphasize one’s prosocial cognitions as a salient marker of the change process. Many participants discussed

how the deficits in their thinking patterns were an indication of high reoffending risk. Participants highlighted the importance of learning about their offending patterns and the causes of their behavior, which is consistent with other research on the benefits of sex offender treatment (Colton et al., 2009; Drapeau, Korner, Bruet, and Granger, 2004; Garrett et al., 2003). Knowledge of one's offending cycle was important not only for asserting agency as described in redemption scripts, but also for self-acceptance despite having committed "such a dastardly thing" as a sex offense. Participants felt that, because they could see the benefits of this treatment program in their own lives, the entire correctional population should go through it. This sentiment was also expressed by persisters, despite their continued non-sexual deviant behavior. No matter what desistance category offenders were placed in, they all derived important benefits from participating in treatment.

### ***PERCIEVED LIKELIHOOD OF REOFFENDING***

To initiate the discussion of participants' ideas about rehabilitation, I asked them to describe their likelihood of sexual reoffending using an adaptation of a risk of reoffending scale developed by Dhami and colleagues (2006). Participants assessed their perceived likelihood of offending on a scale from 1 to 100, with various points of reference along it. Most participants felt confident that they were at "zero" risk for reoffending, despite the MoSOP treatment tenet that suggests one is always at risk of reoffending and must always be aware of that risk (Lacombe, 2008; Morin and Levenson, 2002). There were, however, some differences among desistance outcomes. Most desisters believed they would never reoffend again, while sex offender persisters stated "there is always a chance." Desisters' rejection of the possibility they might reoffend is contrary to expectations based upon treatment's emphasis on recovery as opposed to a cure. However, this rejection may also reflect

desisters' perceptions that their sexual offending was situational, while sex offender persisters were increasingly aware of the chronic nature of their deviance (Rogers et al., 2011). Persisters felt confident about not reoffending sexually, but did not exhibit the same confidence when referring to their primary offending patterns. This persister response is consistent with the ways in which they felt redeemed from sex offending behavior, but condemned to repeat their general offending.

There were some differences between the perceptions of rehabilitation across desistance category. Desisters in this study were more likely to describe how treatment had led to positive changes in their lives. They were also more likely to demonstrate successful use of the tools learned in treatment, especially empathy. The ability to achieve daily implementation of reformed thinking patterns and behaviors may also reflect participants' levels of attachment to conventional norms. Desisters clearly described circumstances that led to their offending behavior. Desisters' explanations for offending were simpler than those of participants in the other categories, however desisters also had fewer complicating factors in their lives. Most desisters did not report histories of abuse in childhood or chronic substance abuse, so their successful rehabilitation may require less cognitive work. For example, Donald (D) described how his "out of control" diabetes and cocaine habit created a recipe for poor judgment. He admitted that while on community supervision for his sex offense he lied to his treatment group about initiating drug use. He also described the physical toll the untreated diabetes had taken on his body. In essence, he had been self-medicating with cocaine. When asked if he was rehabilitated, Donald stated,

From sexual offending? It's easy. All I have to do is start taking insulin again. It created a whole lot of trouble. It caused me going back to drinking, smoking, I was doing anything to feel better than hell every day.

Donald detailed how, once incarcerated, he was treated for his diabetes, achieved sobriety, and regained the physical and emotional strength to approach sex offender treatment honestly. Desisters' explanations of their behaviors are not justifications for them, but rather "acceptable" reasons for why they could have possibly made the mistake of committing a sexual crime. Through their matter-of-fact discussions of the events leading up to their offenses, desisters could more clearly identify the conventions and norms they had violated and translate this into a greater understanding of their deviant behavior.

Edward (D) described how he had become a better person than before his crime and had learned his success would be what he made of it. Edward contrasted his perception of others' rehabilitation with his own experience. When asked if he had been rehabilitated, Edward stated,

I know I am. There ain't no feeling like it. I know I am. As far as what rehabilitation is, it's what you make of it. I could sit down and list out that, "Yeah, rehabilitation means that I know my thinking errors, I know all this, and I know all that," but if a guy doesn't want any kind of rehabilitation, he ain't going to do it. It's a want that each person has to have, I think.

For Edward, motivation was crucial to effective change. For most desisters, this motivation was linked with the enhanced empathy they had developed in treatment (Pithers, 1999). One way in which participants developed empathy was by learning about emotions and emotion regulation. They had learned to articulate their emotional states relative to certain situations, such as their deviant cycles, and exert control over their reactions. Ernest (D) knew he had to deal with his emotions because if he "stuffs them" and becomes depressed he does not care whether he hurts anyone. He identified this as the emotional



condition he experienced when he was sexually assaulting his sister over a five-year period as a juvenile.<sup>19</sup> Ernest stated:

A lot of it is actually dealing with feelings and actually dealing with everything that's going on because once I start shutting down, then it gets to the point where I don't care about anybody, myself, or anybody. I can't afford to let that happen.

Ernest also revealed that the empathy he had developed by recognizing this emotional situation was linked with severe consequences, such as “hurting someone like I hurt my sister.” Emerging desisters consistently discussed emotion work and empathy building in their narratives, but progress toward rehabilitation was somewhat tenuous. One component of their rehabilitation narrative was the assertion that they would resort to self-harm if they were to ever move into their deviant cycle again. Howard (ED) identified the feeling patterns and isolating behavior that had led to his molesting a four-year-old girl, but he was still coming to terms with why he had done it:

KK:           What do you think your likelihood of reoffending again?  
Howard:       Zero.  
KK:           Why do you say that?  
Howard:       Because I'll kill myself first.  
KK:           Really? You feel like it's- Why do you have such a drastic thought about it?  
Howard:       I know my place where I was. If I ever go back that way, I will kill myself.  
KK:           You were really in a bad way when all this took place.  
Howard:       Yes. I just think I was completely depressed.

It was evident in the emerging desisters' descriptions of their rehabilitation that they were still working to overcome the emotional challenges, mostly depression, that had led to their offenses and the subsequent feelings of shame and guilt. For them, suicide was a more desirable outcome than experiencing the pain and shame associated with sexual offending.

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<sup>19</sup> Ernest was charged as an adult in the sexual assault of his sister because he was 17 at the time of the prosecution. The age of majority in Missouri is 17.

This theme was only present in emerging desisters' narratives, suggesting their ideas about acceptance and forgiveness of their offending was still a "work in progress."

Persisters also described themselves as works in progress. As detailed in their descriptions of agency in Chapter 4, they felt rehabilitated from sexual offending but not from general offending. Their statements about their progress toward desistance were consistent with those of sex offender persisters, but their primary challenges surrounded substance abuse and non-sexual criminal behavior. Persisters reported taking it "one day at a time." For example, when asked if he had been rehabilitated, Kevin (P) stated, "Well, yes to a certain degree I think I have. I don't think that I'll commit another crime." Kevin's use of the word "think" suggested he was uncertain about the ability to remain crime free. Persisters described their rehabilitation in uncertain terms, despite many of them having participated in substance abuse programs and sex offender treatment on numerous occasions. When asked if he had been rehabilitated, Gary (P) discussed his lifelong heroin addiction, not sexual offending:

They say, "Once an addict, always an addict." So I don't know, I can't tell you. I might relapse 20 years from now. That's if I live that long. All I can do now is just take it one day at a time.

Harry (P) described the progress he had made in terms of empathy but recognized he was not in control of his general offending behavior. Harry was interviewed in prison where he was serving out the rest of his sentence for absconding from parole. At the time of the *Phase 2* interview Harry had also incurred new charges for assault on a law enforcement officer, which were still pending. When asked if he had been rehabilitated Harry said,

Yes and no. Yes because I really have a sensitive side now. I'm very understanding, I'm very down to earth...and no because, I mean, sometimes I lack, I guess I lack,

I lack in when it comes time to put all my things I learned into pass, into play, and apply them to my life. I'm still working, I'm still a work in progress.

Sex offender persisters were the most likely to discuss treatment as a work in progress, highlighting their concerns with sexual deviance rather than with general offending. Their statements reflected the possibility of offending in the future, and they situated themselves in a process of desistance that most resembled that of a 12 step substance abuse program. For example, Benjamin (SOP) described rehabilitation as follows:

It's just like alcoholism and drug addiction. It's always going to be a work in progress. It's always something that I'm going to have to monitor in my thoughts. I'm going to have to never think "oh okay, I'm really rehabilitated."

Benjamin recognized that his progress toward desistance was ongoing because he would always have to be aware of his behavior and thinking patterns. Although desisters discussed working daily to maintain routines that would prevent them from offending, sex offender persisters' statements revealed the most uncertainty about future risk. Carlos (SOP) quantified his rehabilitation by saying, "I'd say like 90%, give or take." This uncertainty may be due to the constellation of problems they had to contend with, such as substance abuse, mental health issues, the lasting effects of childhood abuse, and family dysfunction, which are indicators of a chronic, antisocial lifestyle (Lussier and Cale, 2013). Sex offender persisters were more likely to discuss their intimacy and sexual deficits in the context of their rehabilitation progress than other participants of this study.

Despite the concern over deviant sexual thoughts, sex offender persisters felt they would not reoffend sexually. The treatment program instilled this confidence through knowledge of their offending cycles, even though they continued to exhibit the "triggering" behaviors that were connected to their offending patterns. Fred (SOP) felt he was

rehabilitated from ever harming children in the way he harmed his step-children. While exerting agency in describing how he was no longer attracted to children, he described the ongoing challenges with his predilection for teenage girls:

I am not—and I firmly believe this—I am not a pedophile. Yes, my victims were young, and it's pedophilia. However, I am not a pedophile. My interest is not in children, and I've done enough research. Again, I'm not just there. I'm learning. I studied, and so I studied me. Where are my interests, and I didn't hold back. I could lie to anybody, but if I'm lying to myself, then I'm not making any progress. I'm like, "How am I going to learn about me if I keep BSing myself? What are my interests? What turns me on, just say? Granted, yes, not children, but late teens.

Fred's disturbing self-discovery was an important part of his treatment progress, but it was also an indicator that he still struggled to control his sexual urges toward adolescents. For him, the cognitive battle with sexual deviance was a display of agency over his offending behavior. Shortly after the *Phase 2* interview, Fred was returned to prison for failing a polygraph examination.

Paul (SOP) felt confident about not reoffending, reporting that his likelihood of reoffending was "none." However, he then qualified his answer when considering the possibility of his particular offense happening again:

None or ... the only time I would be in danger of reoffending, because of what my case is, would be if I were to have teenage girls spend a night in my home with me being unsupervised, because my offense was peeping while they were asleep. But I don't see myself doing it ever again.

Paul was convicted of secretly videotaping himself molesting three of his daughters while they slept, and he served 12 years in prison. Although Paul felt he was not at risk of reoffending, he qualified his statement to highlight the particular sexual deviance he displayed. He also asserted his conventionality by suggesting that the notion that he might have teenage girls for a sleepover was "preposterous." However, he also indicated his deviance was peeping, when in reality it also involved molestation and videotaping. This

type of cognitive dissonance was present in most sex offender persisters' narratives about rehabilitation, wherein they tried to reconcile their deviance with the norms and values they were attempting to adopt.

Raymond (SOP) also expressed tentativeness about his level of rehabilitation. This may have been because in the three years between interviews he had been returned to prison three times for grooming young boys at the library. Throughout his narrative, Raymond fluctuated between feeling rehabilitated and qualifying his statements to reflect the specific triggers of his sexual deviance. When asked if he had been rehabilitated, Raymond said:

That's a pretty hard question to answer. Yes, I think to a degree I have been. I don't want to make a qualified statement. Yes, I'm definitely ... make that affirmative. I think I've learned a lot and I have to be ever vigilant in the way I handle myself. Every day when I walk out the door of my house, I never know what to expect. I have to remember all of these things, like I don't go in a city park, sit at a park bench by myself and read a newspaper for an hour. You get a parole violation for that or a technical violation. You don't go any place where you knowingly know that there are going to be kids there. If there are kids there, you avoid them at all cost. Those things you have to constantly ... you may remind yourself of. I can't say with absolute certainty that I'm rehabilitated, but I haven't had any thoughts of reoffending, if that's of any consequence. I always ... I was just going to say, when I write out anything for these assignments we have, I always put on there, "My goal is," and then I'll put in big bold letters, "no more victims."

### ***MEANING OF REHABILITATION***

To gain additional insight into the meanings sex offenders associate with their own level of rehabilitation, participants in this study were asked for their general definitions of rehabilitation. It is important to understand the perceptions of rehabilitation and reoffending from the offenders' perspectives because they are the "experts" on themselves and those with whom they are in treatment (Maruna, 2012; McNeill, 2006). The current sample is unique in that the duration and intensity of their treatment is more extensive than others' in substance abuse or mental health treatment programs. Additionally, the heterogeneity amongst any

group of sex offenders in regard to offending patterns and background factors requires further examination of these meanings. As such, it is important to examine participants' perceptions about their own reoffending as well as others. The interview question, "Do you think you have been rehabilitated?" elicited a variety of responses, including one from a desister, Edward, who asked rhetorically, "What does rehabilitation mean?" It became apparent throughout the interviews that the meaning of rehabilitation contained very specific elements like remaining sober, as well as larger, philosophical and moral goals.

Consistent with their own comparisons of their deviant thoughts and actions to alcohol or drug addiction, persisters and sex offender persisters were most likely to define rehabilitation as a "recovery process." This definition likely reflects their exposure to many forms of treatment over the courses of their criminal careers, but it also situates them in a place that allows for relapse. Benjamin (SOP) compared rehabilitation for sex offenders to rehabilitation for drug offenders:

I think rehabilitation is the same concept as being in recovery. You're always going to be in recovery. You're always going to be rehabilitating because it could be 10, 20 years down the road and maybe something happens, something happens if you don't monitor your thoughts and your feelings and your behaviors; there's always, always going to be a chance to re-offend. You've got to understand that. If you don't understand that then chances of you re-offending are probably going to be great, because you're kidding yourself that oh, I went through the class, and I went through the program, and I'm fine.

In contrast to these descriptions of the recovery process, desisters and emerging desisters were more likely to describe rehabilitation as a "changed" pattern of thinking about how to abide by the law and, more importantly, not hurt others. Louis (D) described rehabilitation:

Changed. I feel or believe that you are a changed person, a changed person that's not going to break any laws, that's going to stay on the straight and narrow, and do what you need to do in life to succeed. That's what I believe rehabilitated is and not reoffend or make victims of everything in your life.

Likewise, Stanley (D) stated:

My definition of rehabilitation is a complete turnaround: lifestyle, your thought process, your attitude towards others. It all changes, like maybe it was good before or okay, but now, it's great. If I had issues resolved, you've had ... you got something that you were dealing with that's been taken care of. And then, I also think that it would mean like problems that you didn't realize you had before. I mean they're taken care of like you realized that you have maybe some issue like you're either denying or just sweeping under the rug, they are taken care of. Basically, everything just changes for the better.

All offenders described the importance of learning about their offending patterns as a mechanism to rehabilitation. This is a crucial part of sex offender treatment as it helps to identify deviant patterns and triggers, and encourage empathy, thereby facilitating the relapse prevention process. Learning about their offending patterns also provided a mechanism for agency. Gary (P) stated, "Being rehabilitated, you know, to me it means whatever led me up to that event, I'm going to make sure it never happens again." In this way, Gary asserted his control over his sexual offending behavior, even though he did not have control over his heroin addiction. Michael (SOP) echoed this agency and added that being accepted by the sex offender group as someone who had made the same mistakes had helped his rehabilitation process. Michael also highlighted the decision to change as important for sex offenders:

I think the fact that I've gone through all the programs, gone through all the information and therapy have rehabilitated me, but rehabilitation really is learning how to control the things that you couldn't control before or didn't control before, and if you get to know yourself, if you get to know why you do things and that you're not the only one that does them, you do make a decision that you want your life to be different, and that's rehabilitation to me.

Reflecting upon one's mindset, and the decision to change, was a recurring theme in participants' definitions of rehabilitation. Mindset refers to the set of attitudes a person holds that informs how that person approaches a situation. Part of this mindset for the participants was the desire to change. Motivation to change is highlighted by treatment professionals as essential to reformation (Marshall et al., 1993; Pithers, 1999). In one study, offenders described persisters as those who had failed to change their mindset (Cobbina and Bender, 2012). Timothy's (P) opinion about his mindset reflected the importance of developing core beliefs:

The state of mind would be that what you knew when you were taught when you were a child that the difference between the right and wrong. You don't steal from somebody. If I have this philosophy that, inmates... thieves don't steal from thieves, there's honor among thieves, then I should have that same honor among society. You worked all your life for something, and I come into your house and steal it from you. That ain't right. You're working in a store and I come in and then I robbed you, if you don't give me what I want to kill you. Why? It's not right. I feel I'm a lot a better person that I've ever been. Always not on alcohol.

Howard's (ED) mindset had shifted from his deviant thinking patterns to always having his victim and the harm he caused in the forefront of his mind. Howard stated:

I don't think like that no more. I don't act like I was back then. I know what I did was wrong and it's a constant reminder in the back of my head. It's always there. My past is always there.

Deviant case analysis produced one offender who did not feel like rehabilitation was an option. Mark (SOP) felt that his experiences as a criminal and in prison had forever changed him in ways that made him fundamentally different. However, Mark described the changes in his life that were focused on not reoffending, even though he felt beyond rehabilitation:

I'm not sure I even believe in the word "rehabilitation." I'm not even sure that's possible. We prisoners, in general, because of your experiences, we'll never be the same again. The prison experience has altered them in ways which altered me, in



ways which sometimes they don't even know it. There are things that I'm conscious of, which I actually pay attention to where I go, who I'm interacting with, the kind of activities I'm going to engage in. I pay attention to those things a lot more closely than I used to. I don't want to do anything which is harmful. Again, a couple little goals I've got there and I think about those... I think that once a person is, you can't un-live an experience. It's always going to be a part of you, whether you choose to act on those ... Because you're always going to continue to have those impulses. It doesn't matter what it is, if you have an addiction to chocolate, if you stop eating chocolate, you're still going to be thinking about chocolate somewhere along the line.

### ***WHAT KEEPS OTHERS FROM REOFFENDING?***

Sex offenders' perceptions of how and why others reoffend are important for understanding the desistance process. In this study, participants' appraisals of how other sex offenders might be rehabilitated were in agreement with their own perceptions about how treatment influences desistance. This could be an artifact of the treatment protocol and the methods by which they are instructed to prevent reoffending, but allowing participants to discuss rehabilitation of the "other" and not themselves produced consistent descriptions of their perceptions of what it takes to desist. In most cases, the "other" was someone in the treatment group who had committed a crime against a child and was most consistent with the sex offender stereotype. The themes here describe what participants think it takes to desist, which is consistent with the experience and outcomes of the desisters, as well as with some redemption scripts.

When describing what it takes for others to avoid reoffending, participants highlighted the most deviant individuals whom they had encountered in treatment. All participants asserted that changing one's attitude and learning about offending were essential elements of desistance. Persisters and sex offender persisters were most likely to say that, in order for others to not reoffend, they had to learn about their offending behavior. This may be associated with the fact that they are still in the early processes of change and may have

much deeper seated issues than desisters and emerging desisters. For example, Lawrence (P) said this about others' reoffending patterns: "For them, I guess realize what they actually did because we've been trying to talk and I guess they don't realize what they done for some reason." Lawrence revealed that others he had been in treatment with did not understand what they had done wrong. Howard (ED) also felt there were people he was in treatment with both in prison and in the community who were not going to be rehabilitated. Howard described one offender who "didn't think he did anything wrong. He molested his own daughter. Her mama's there, watching. He thought that was okay."

Sex offender persisters were more likely to reflect upon themselves when describing the reoffending patterns of others. For example, Michael (SOP) felt that education was the best resource for someone to not sexually reoffend, and he thought about what he had learned about himself. He said it takes:

A lot of education. About why these things happen, the therapy that I've been through, being able to talk to other people and find out that you're not just making excuses. These were real problems that you faced when we were younger and that they did affect you. I was always taught to be the tough guy that didn't let anything get to him. That's what my father expected of me, and that's what I expected of me, and I'm not that tough guy. I'm sensitive, and all of these things have worked on me through my whole life.

Benjamin (SOP) also discussed the importance of understanding sexual offending behavior in order to prevent it. In his narrative, he not only referred to the things that had happened in his past, but also to how they had affected his present relationships, especially with his daughter. In this way, he linked feelings of empathy to his own rehabilitation process. He stated:

I think a key thing is to really understand or try to understand, because you won't actually really understand what this other person had to go through. If you don't try to

have some kind of empathy and there are times when it will damn near bring tears to my eyes that my daughter. I was daddy. She looked up to me as daddy. Now I'm "creepo." I'm sure it affected her in a lot of different areas.

In addition to empathy in the participant's narratives, learning about consequences of offending, such as imprisonment and loss of freedom, was an important component of rehabilitation. Andrew (P) felt that for others to not reoffend they needed to "Come to the conclusion that they don't want to pay those kind of consequences any more. Because it's a waste. You can't get those years back." This point was salient for him since he had spent most of his adult life in prison for robbery. Likewise, Carlos (SOP) linked empathy and personal consequences to his belief about not reoffending: "One is to just think about what it caused the person that you commit the crime against," then consider the offender. "They've been to prison. All they have to think of is going back to prison and thinking about the awful meals." Carlos's brief description of empathy (the only one present in his entire interview) and his emphasis on the consequences for his own life suggest he may not be as far as others in his rehabilitation progress. In fact, Carlos was required to serve the remainder of his prison sentence because he was terminated from the program for lack of therapeutic progress. The importance of "awful meals" to Carlos suggests he is not very far along the path to reformation.

One deviant case was Paul (SOP), who felt that treatment should be mandatory and that if one failed he should be permanently put in the "predator house," which contained all those who had been civilly committed.<sup>20</sup> His perspective is ironic in that he "completed" treatment, but not successfully enough to afford him parole immediately, and does not

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<sup>20</sup> Sex offenders who are deemed by mental health professionals as unfit to return to society after serving their criminal sentence are considered Sexually Violent Predators (Chapter 632 of the Missouri Revised Statutes). These offenders are housed indefinitely in the Farmington Correctional Center where they receive ongoing treatment services. To date, no one has been released from this program.

consider himself a predator.<sup>21</sup> He spent an additional 18 months in prison after finishing the program before he was conditionally released. Paul felt offenders needed more mandatory classes:

When I was in MoSOP, there in prison, I seen guys come down for the second or third time, just the sex offenders. If they've been down a second or third time, I would say that they've got a problem and they should be put in the predator house. If they have that type of a mental problem, if they can't resist going up to children, or teenagers, then I definitely would say that they don't need to be on the streets. And that would scare me.

These data suggest that all participants exposed to the sex offender treatment program feel that the lessons they learn offer a path to desistance. There was much overlap in the descriptions of the ways in which participants felt one could be rehabilitated. Many realized that one's mindset and motivation to change were essential to effectively rehabilitated. Also, participants discussed the value in learning about how one's past is linked to offending patterns and deviant thought processes. It is likely that all participants realized the benefits of learning to cope with the adversity in their past and felt some relief in understanding how it had affected their lives. Maybe it was possible for them to be "normal" after all.

What was absent from most rehabilitation narratives was the concept of redemption. Even though participants expressed redemption scripts while discussing treatment, when asked specifically about rehabilitation, concepts of redemption did not directly appear. Carich and colleagues (2003) referred to redemption scripts as "effective bridges" that connect therapy with everyday life. While things like learning about offending patterns and empathy were part of redemption scripts, no offender directly discussed how his treatment helped him get a second chance at life. The most intrinsic change was feeling empathy for

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<sup>21</sup> In some cases, offenders who successfully complete treatment are denied parole if the parole board does not deem them fit. This may be due to issues in treatment or prison conduct violations.

their victim and others. Offenders who had desisted have effectively had incorporated the lessons from treatment into their lives to keep them from reoffending. Equally important is that these lessons kept them from offending in any way, not just sexually. It is possible that these participants had the least likelihood of offending in general, but nonetheless treatment lessons reflect the importance of self-control and coping strategies one has learned.

Participants in this study all associated the same characteristic with desistance—a change in one’s mindset. This is consistent with other research confirming the importance of the cognitive shift (Cobbina and Bender, 2012; Maruna, 2001; Paternoster and Bushway, 2009). However, since only 20% of this sample are considered desisters, there is likely more to uncover. Perhaps, as several sex offenders suggested, there is more to the process of changing one’s mindset than the decision to change, and such change must be accompanied by other individual and social factors that influence law-abiding behavior, such as empathy, stable home environments, and work prospects. More importantly, in terms of sexual deviance, it is apparent that the sex offender persisters in this sample found the tools learned in treatment to be essential for their success, but they were lacking in other cognitive and social components that would help them create an “effective bridge” between the changes in mindset and real life.

## **CHAPTER 6: IDENTITY MANAGEMENT AND LIFE GOALS**

One of the aims of this research is to use sex offenders' expressions of condemnation and redemption scripts to understand how they might differ due to their unique experiences with restrictions and stigma related to their offending. While collateral consequences such as low self-esteem, enhanced shame, and depression have been documented (Levenson et al., 2007; Tewksbury, 2005; Tewksbury and Lees, 2006), the impacts of conviction and of the treatment process on sex offenders' identities is less understood. Collins and Nee (2010: 317) suggested that,

The identity of those who sexually offend is influenced significantly at both an individual and societal level. The shame experienced by sexual offenders and the subsequent hostility and ostracism from society leads to those who fall into this category dissociating themselves from the label, which has repercussions in terms of treatment outcomes and reintegration back into the community.

The negotiation of criminal versus non-criminal identities has been a focus of psychological and criminological literature, but less research has focused on how sex offenders manage their sex offender identities. What makes their label unique is the "demonization" of sex offenders (Matravers, 2003). The stigma associated with being a sex offender adds complexity to identity management that has not yet been explored. Goffman (1963: 4) wrote, "By definition, of course, we believe the person with a stigma is not quite human," and Waldram (2009) suggested that Goffman could have been referring to sex offenders in the present day. Sex offenders' negotiations of this "inhuman" identity (Waldram, 2009) is central to this analysis. Through treatment, sex offenders try to wear both identities: the stigmatized and the normal (Goffman, 1963). When adopting the normal identity, they engage in "othering," where they do not adopt the worst characteristics of sex offenders (Cowburn and Dominelli, 2001; Hudson, 2005; Lacombe, 2008). For example, the

term pedophile has become “synonymous” with sex offender (Matravers, 2003:5; Kernsmith et al., 2009). Sex offenders can mitigate their associated identities with that of the pedophile by presenting themselves as opposed to that categorization, as well as asserting the conventional belief that the “others” are still inhuman (Goffman, 1963; Hudson, 2005).

The ways in which sex offenders manage their identities after conviction are also reflected in their perceptions of success (Hudson, 2005). Evidence suggests that offenders who are optimistic about their chances for re-entry into the community are more likely to reintegrate successfully (Burnett, 2000; Burnett and Maruna, 2004; Lebel et al., 2008; Visher and O’Connell, 2012). More specifically, research shows those with redemptive narratives demonstrates higher levels of well-being (McAdams, Reynolds, Lewis, Patten, and Bowman, 2001). However, other research suggests that offenders sometimes think their chances are better than the chances of those around them, and this “self-enhancement bias” is not linked with success outside of prison (Dhami et al., 2006; Cobbina and Bender, 2012). Despite the growing body of knowledge about offenders’ perceptions of success, not much is known about how these perceptions relate to desistance, especially for sex offenders. In this study, participants did not display an alternate identity to the label of sex offender, but rather they tried to distance themselves from it. This is because all participants reflected that the label was a segment of their identity they had to accept no matter how much they rejected the stereotype. Therefore, learning about their goals and perceived means of attaining those goals reflected their perceived levels of agency, as well as their individual viewpoints about successful desistance (Laws and Ward, 2011).

This research adds to the literature by presenting information on identity management and how sex offenders in different desistance categories meet their goals and plan for the

future. In this chapter, I outline the mechanisms sex offenders use to negotiate their identities in different contexts. I also discuss how this sample perceived sex offenders as compared to other types of offenders. Then, I explore the role of optimism and goal setting by examining offenders' goals from *Phase 1* and what their long term goals were at *Phase 2*.

### ***IDENTITY MANAGEMENT FOR SEX OFFENDERS***

Scholars suggest that to truly desist from crime one must shed the criminal identity and adopt an alternative one (Copes et al., 2012; Hochstetler et al., 2012; Giordano et al., 2002; Jacinto, Duterte, Sales, and Murphy, 2008; Paternoster and Bushway, 2009). However, the experiences of sex offenders suggest negotiation of new identities that are different from their public label may be out of reach. The societal “belief in redeemability” may not extend to sex offenders, considering the public’s attitudes are highly punitive and conflicted about the roles and capabilities of treatment in sex offender desistance (Maruna and King, 2004; 2009). The extensive effects of the sex offender label contribute to offenders’ ability, or lack thereof, to successfully transition from this deviant master status (Becker, 1963) to one that is considered “redeemable” (Hudson, 2005; Maruna and King, 2009; Waldram, 2009; 2010).

Beyond issues of punitiveness and treatment efficacy is the questionable idea that sex offenders can possibly reform from the severity of a criminal past. Studies show that people believe criminality is “set in stone” (Maruna and King, 2009), and that sex offenders in particular are “evil” (Waldram, 2009). How sex offenders think of themselves in relationship to the sex offender label has important ramifications for desistance and effectiveness rehabilitation and punishment. Scholars in the symbolic interactionist tradition suggest that one’s identity is shaped by the perceptions of others (Giordano et al., 2002; Stevens, 2010), an idea that is also referred to as the “looking-glass self” (Cooley, 1902; Goffman, 1959;



Tice, 1992). This idea is relevant to desistance in that offenders must have people around them who believe in their change and effectively communicate that belief (Maruna, LeBel, Mitchell, and Naples, 2004; Stevens, 2010). To fully internalize a desired identity, it must be substantiated through interpersonal relationships (Tice, 1992). That is, one's experience with the others produces the most salient effects on identity. It is important to examine the looking-glass experiences of sex offenders, since there may be dissonance between the way they see themselves and the way they are perceived by the public (Tewkbury and Copes, 2012). If there is dissonance, this may be associated with elevated risk of reoffending (King, 2013), and reconciling it may be associated with motivation to change (Tierney and McCabe, 2001). Uncovering how sex offenders negotiate the potential cognitive dissonance between self and reflected appraisals may provide insight into the desistance process. To explore this, participants in this study were asked if they thought of themselves as sex offenders, how the label made them feel, and if they felt like sex offenders were different from other types of offenders.

#### **“YOU KNOW YOU’RE A MARKED MAN”**

First, all participants confirmed the label of sex offender as stigmatizing and condemning. As described in Chapter 4, this perception was due to assumptions about the types of crimes sex offenders had committed, especially the assumption that they were all child molesters—the worst type of offender. Participants felt helpless to change the public's perception, but made numerous attempts to dispel the myth that all sex offenders are the same. Through the management of this “spoiled identity” (Goffman, 1963), participants attempted to differentiate themselves from the stereotypical sex offender. Other research has suggested that offenders distance themselves from these stereotypes as a way to reduce their

guilt and shame, as well as signal their normalcy (Copes et al., 2008; Hochstetler et al., 2012; Hudson, 2005; Jacinto et al., 2008; Sykes and Matza, 1957). Many described the strategies they used to hide their label from others as well as how the stigma of the label affected their emotional states. Participants described feeling “demoralized” by the label but also said that they were “pretty used to it.”

Desisters and emerging desisters discussed the effects of the stigma as related to finding employment or engaging in conventional activities, such as attending church. Persisters and sex offender persisters were the most likely to discuss how the label of sex offender affected their self-esteem and their identities. This difference suggests that the closer offenders get to desistance, the further along the identity transformation path they are (Giordano et al., 2002; Paternoster and Bushway, 2009). Harry (P) said the label affected his emotional state because of the way he thinks society sees him. He stated, “I just feel like they hurt my self-esteem because, like just certain—just the view of society.” Gary (P) described how the label of sex offender caused him to feel negatively about himself, and he reasoned that his continued drug use was a way to deal with these negative emotions. He stated:

You know, it [the label] make me feel bad—it does. I think it’s one of the reasons why I beat myself up. You know, using drugs, you know, because the label itself. [I’m] telling you, somebody in a group talk about sex offender, child molester, “chimo,” they call them that, you know?

Gary referred to the name “chimo,” which is short for child molester, and was a name used in prison and in the community. For Gary, this label was emotionally difficult because he viewed himself as a lifelong drug user, not a sex offender, and he felt helpless to shed the label. Sex offender persisters experienced reduced self-esteem, as persisters did, but they also discussed feelings of worth associated with being a sex offender. Mark (SOP) stated:

Sometimes I don't feel that ... I don't feel worthy of life. It's not something I'm actually conscious of for the most part, it's just sort of an undercurrent. There's still a lot ... the shame that goes with it. I've accepted the fact that what I did 30 years ago was unconscionable, that I did these things that the label [suggests].

In Mark's narrative, he demonstrated the cognitive dissonance sex offenders experience when negotiating their current identities with their former ones, and in relation to how embedded the sex offender label is. Mark the crimes he had committed, but struggled with the fact that those offenses share the characteristics of the stereotypical sex offender. Mark had sexually assaulted numerous women over the course of his criminal career and felt much shame for this behavior. Like other sex offender persisters, he was aware that his crimes most closely resembled the stigmatized stereotype that the label incurred on him. However, in another part of his narrative he differentiated himself by reflecting upon the fact that he identified as a thief more than as a sex offender. To him, a thief was redeemable, but a sex offender was not (Copes et al., 2008).

Paul (SOP) described how, after 12 years in prison, the stigma of his offense left him feeling fearful of others who dislike sex offenders. Also, this fear led to his continued isolation, and the public nature of the registry led to his feelings of vulnerability. Paul had internalized the identity and felt like a "marked man," especially with the continued rejection he experience in his neighborhood. He stated:

It makes you think about things differently. You know you're a marked man. You know that, at any time, somebody could come up behind you, because since you are registered your license plates are registered and everything else, and somebody could come up and say, "I could just blow your head off." I did have a neighbor that my brother told I was moving in, and he had a problem with it and told us that ... he told my brother that he didn't care if the whole world was on fire and his yard was the only sanctuary there was, I wasn't allowed to be on it.

To cope with the sex offender label, almost all offenders made attempts to distinguish themselves from the stereotype (Hudson, 2005). Some scholars suggest that one's identity is based upon one's level of commitment to that identity (Adler, 1985). Several studies have documented how offenders distance themselves from the worst version of their offending behavior (Copes et al., 2012; Hochstetler et al., 2012; Jacinto et al., 2008). In one study of drug dealers' identity management, Jacinto and colleagues (2008: 431) found that they resisted the label because of the stigma associated with drug dealers as "depraved profiteers who push drugs on vulnerable youth because of the stereotypical notion of a greedy, consumed by addiction, schoolyard dealer." Actually, dealers appeared more committed to non-deviant factors in their lives and felt their dealing was not as bad as others' offenses. In contrast to Jacinto and colleagues' (2008) findings that dealers "distanced themselves" from stigma and formed attachment to prosocial parts of their identities, these opportunities were not available for most sex offenders. The majority of the public believe sex offenders are a homogenous group, and, regardless of individual circumstances, all had to negotiate this assumption in relation to their true selves.

Instead, participants in this study suggested that there were more within-group than between-group differences. It became clear throughout the narratives that sex offenders constantly contrasted themselves with the "worst of the worst" offenders as a way to establish their "goodness." Sex offenders also tried, as Waldram (2009:227) describes, "to position themselves somewhere short of the conceptual line demarcating the seriously bad from the truly evil, a line that defines the possibility of rehabilitation, if not redemption." In most of their interactions with the sex offender community, such as in prison or in treatment, they were able to identify someone who was worse than them. This form of othering was also

seen in those convicted of child offenses and who most resembled the sex offender stereotype (namely sex offender persisters).

Sex offenders do not agree with the public assessment of them as a homogenous group, and their attempts at differentiation might be considered signs of desistance efforts (Bushway and Apel, 2012; Maruna, 2011, 2012). With these signals, sex offenders are trying to show their conventional and moral agency, which they have obtained or strengthened through treatment, to identify themselves as desisters from sex offending (Bushway and Apel, 2012; Pithers, 1999). This form of othering was especially true for desisters and emerging desisters in this study, who felt they were a “good person” who did a “bad thing.” Instead, they saw themselves as “opportunistic rather than serial sex offenders” (Rogers et al., 2011: 526). Persisters also tried to make this distinction and highlight their general criminal careers as evidence of more conventional criminal behavior (Kort-Butler, 2012). For example, Gary (P) described how his crime of rape took place during a robbery and kidnapping: “I can’t see myself as a sex offender; it’s just what had happened, you know? I went out there and no thought in my head and we did it, but it happened.” In this way, some participants rejected the idea that they were “authentic” sex offenders (Hochstetler et al., 2012).

Another attempt at differentiating from the label and signaling conventionality was participants’ efforts to keep their criminal past from the public. Hiding the label reflected awareness of the way the public feels toward that class of offense, regardless of the level of offense seriousness. Participants’ first efforts at hiding their offense took place in prison. Benjamin (SOP) described his experience hiding his label from other inmates when he

moved from the sex offender treatment program into the general prison population. When asked how the label made him feel, Benjamin stated:

I don't like it, but I did to myself so I can't be mad at society or politicians or whoever. I did it to myself. It's pretty well sucks. Having to register, having people having to know, of course, coming back in the system you have to be real wary of a whole lot of things as far as people knowing because in here you don't want a whole lot of people knowing about it.

As shown in other research, participants in this study discussed the importance of hiding a sex offense from other inmates because of the hierarchy of offenses that exists in prison (Spencer, 2009; Presser and Gunnison, 1999). In Samuel's (SOP) description of this hierarchy, he suggested that sex offenders are targets acknowledged there is a pecking order. He stated:

In here [prison], the sex offenders are so isolated. They stay in their shame and isolation. They have no skills, personally, and guys just—they threaten them, steal from them, crap on them, and the problem is the guys who are doing it are criminals too, but we have this hierarchy of what's acceptable and not.

Harry (P) also highlighted how, in prison, there is a hierarchy of offender types, and child molesters are at the bottom. Harry stated, "Yeah. Like they hate sex offenders, child molesters, and they try to assault them and beat them up." Harry also said that he did not see himself as a sex offender, and most other inmates assumed he was a drug offender because he is black and comes from the a tough neighborhood in St. Louis. Harry had returned to prison for a new non-sexual offense, assault on a law enforcement officer, which he admitted to disclosing first to inmates rather than the statutory rape. Harry also alluded to shame he experienced due to others' appraisals of him. He said,

They prey on the weak. I mean, they probably have some guys that will test me, but I mean I don't go around like a big old scary sex offender. People who see me more likely, I mean for like a drug problems, drugs or something like that, and so they

think I'm a drug offender. When they see that I've been committed as a sex offender they like "man...."

Participants also described methods to hide their statuses from the public. Edward (D), who had successfully completed parole shortly after our first interview, kept his status a secret, but said he is honest if someone inquires about it. He reestablished his "real identity" as a meth cook and dealer, not a sex offender, in the following excerpt:

I don't put it out there for everybody. If somebody asks me, I will tell him, but I don't feel myself as being somebody that is out, and I'm not. I'm not a person that goes out stalking teenagers. It's just not me. It never has been. I wasn't raised that way. Like I said, I made a bad mistake. I was a meth cook, a meth user.

Edward detailed further how he rejected the sex offender identity. He invoked the "good person who made a bad mistake" philosophy and tried not to have the offense in his consciousness. Nonetheless, the label and its requirements affected the complete adoption of an alternate identity:

I don't think about being a sex offender. I really don't. [I think about it]when I have to go register. I'm consciously always now aware of who and what is around me. You have to be. I won't go ... there's a lot of places that I guess I won't go unless I have somebody with me because I don't want to ever be questioned. I can live in the mindset and go around all day long thinking, "I'm a sex offender. I'm a sex offender. I'm a sex offender." You know what that's going to do? It's going to make me go out and act out. I'm not a sex offender in the sense that I'm going out looking for women to rape. I'm a sex offender because I made a mistake in my life. I don't plan on making that mistake again.

Lawrence (P) did not feel his crime merited the label of sex offender, stating, "I mean, but I don't really choose to view myself as that because, you know, yeah, I did what I did, but it's just a friend. It's just like I went out and had consensual, ours was consensual." The label of sex offender did not "stick" for him because he did not view his offense (statutory rape) as being as serious as others. In fact, he minimized the crime by suggesting it

was consensual. Lawrence felt questioned by the community about assumptions of his crime and coped with that by directly addressing the misconceptions. He stated, “I just tell them “hey, this is what happened,” because I don't see no big deal on it, like some other people with it, you know, rather them not stereotype me like others.” Through interactions with others, most participants attempted to place these types of boundaries between their own sex offending and the image others had.

Ultimately, the label’s stigmatizing effects were most salient for participants while they were in prison and on supervision. Once off supervision, offenders remarked that the stigma’s effects were greatest when registering or disclosing their criminal history for employment. Eric (SOP) had been in an out of prison for the past 30 years. He thought of himself as an opportunistic sex offender, as well as coming from a very troubled background. Further, he had gone to prison when he was 19 years old and had not been released until he was 37. Over the course of his parole, Eric had returned to prison five times for parole violations and domestic violence charges. Despite his record, Eric offered some hope in mitigating the effects of his label, stating “The closer I get to feeling like I’m off parole, the closer I get to feeling like I’m no longer a sex offender.” In his case, the hope for an alternative identity was on the horizon.

#### **“THEY ALL DO SOMETHING BAD”**

To examine the potential roles for distancing, participants were asked to describe the differences between general offenders and sex offenders. In general, the majority of participants felt that sex offenders and non-sex offenders were no different from one another. This perception is supported by research that shows the predictors of general deviance are consistent between sex offenders and non-sex offenders (Hanson and Harris, 1998). Clinical



assumptions about the etiology and treatment of sex offending suggest that sexual deviance relies on the cognitive structures that support harming others sexually. In light of this, it is important to explore sex offenders' cognitions about their crimes in comparison to non-sexual offenders'. Some might argue allowing some denial and minimization supports their offending patterns, but others have suggested it helps offenders reframe themselves in the context of others' "evil" deeds (Waldram, 2010). In this study, as participants compared themselves to general offender types, they could not escape comparisons to other sex offenders. In this theme, there were no emergent differences between desistance categories, suggesting the possibility of a collective view of offending behavior.

Many participants felt that sex offenders were no different from other types of offenders. Donald (D) stated, "No, I don't feel remarkable or unique." Andrew (P) likened sex offenders' behaviors to other offenders' but recognized that felons in the general population do not agree. When asked if there were differences between types of offenders, he stated, "Absolutely not. Only in the charges stuff. If another offender sees a guy and they think they may break good, maybe they will get away with saying or doing stuff, they will try to [mess with] you." Ronald (ED) likened drug users and sex offenders in his understanding of the cognitions involved in both types of offending. He also discussed the mindset associated with offending versus that of not offending. He felt the mindset was similar for both sex offenders and non-sex offenders, though drug dealers also had a physical addiction. He stated:

No, I don't think they're any different. I don't believe they are a damned bit different. I think that a drug addict is always going to be a drug addict. I don't think ... I think that a sex offender, however, can, through therapy and everything else, can ... it's not a physical addiction. It's not. It's not like someone is hooked on drugs. It's more of a mental thing, and that's it. You clean up your mind. Your mind is like a computer, garbage in, garbage out. That's the way I look at it.

Another mechanism used to assert conventionality was the suggestion that there are many general offenders who likely have a sex offense in their background, but it remains undetected. This supports Lussier and colleagues' (2011; 2012) assertion that the highest risk sex offenders are also the best at avoiding detection. This line of thinking is also consistent with other research demonstrating that the majority of sex offenses against children are perpetrated by someone they know, thereby reducing the likelihood the crime will be reported (see Matravers, 2003). Other research supports the idea that sexual deviance is a quite common occurrence in the general population, with 95% of non-sexual offenders reporting deviant sexual fantasies (Williams, Cooper, Howell, Yuille, and Paulhus, 2009). Howard (ED) felt all criminals do something bad, but recognized one's criminal history might never be known:

They all do something bad. Yes, some crimes are worse than others. You never know the history behind a person. Same guy that robbed may have been molested as a child and that's what he may know. You never know what's behind the history of the guy.

Louis (D) also highlighted the same issue, stating:

I don't think they're any different than anybody else. Just as what they do, somebody else is doing. They just ain't getting caught doing. They just ain't getting caught doing it so that's how I look at it. There's a lot of people out here doing things that they shouldn't do, but they're doing it anyway. Just because someone else got caught doing it, that don't mean somebody else out there ain't doing it.

Note that in both Louis's and Howard's descriptions of differences between offender types, they refer to sex offenders as "them." This linguistic choice was more consistent among the desister categories, which suggests the label of sex offender was not entirely absorbed into their identities (Waldram, 2009).

Participants also emphasized their moral goodness by stressing the importance of examining each individual case. This likely reflects lessons learned in treatment, as well as attempts to maneuver away from the sex offender identity. Sex offenders acknowledged that through treatment they had learned much about individuals' lives and how life events and circumstances affect entry into sex offending behavior. Peter (SOP) noted that examining each case facilitates the detection of these differences. It was also apparent that Peter was reflecting his own "humanity" in this discussion by distancing himself from the stereotype. In response to the question, "Do you think sex offenders are different than other types of offenders?" Peter stated:

No. I don't feel that way. A lot of them probably do, but I don't. I mean we're all ... I'll be honest, the way I see it we're all human beings, we all got different problems. Some don't deal with it, some do. It all depends on what the case it is, to be honest with you. I'm not going to sit here and say sex offenders are different than anybody else. There is a lot of them that are different. A lot of your ones that don't really give a damn who they hurt, as long as they get their satisfaction, it don't matter. Those are the kind that even I cannot stomach.

In his narrative, Peter cannot "stomach" those who do not care about others' feelings and differentiates them by referring to worse sex offenders as "them." Benjamin's (SOP) narrative was characteristic of most sex offender persisters who felt it was important to consider the etiology of sex offending behavior and how one's background disadvantage influences the crime. Benjamin was less certain about differences between sex offenders, but highlighted the importance of the reasons behind one's criminal acts, as well as the fact that sex offending often is not even about sex, as ways to differentiate the severity of his offense. When asked if he thought sex offenders are different from other types of offenders, he stated:

I don't know. It's hard to say. I would say no because when people commit crimes there are reasons. Some people are just "this is what I want to do," but a lot of times a drug and alcohol related incident or whatever, you get yourself into a hole psychologically, like an alcoholic when they turn to alcohol to drown out their

sorrows or to ease their pain or whatever. There are other issues involved. When I went through the program they said your type of offenses isn't about sex. It's about other issues. You have other issues in your life. As soon as you figure out what these other issues are then you can move on. They'll say maybe you had issues about in life you weren't getting needs met as a human being, not financially, certainly, but as a human being. Maybe you had poor self-esteem. Maybe you had a myriad of things. I think a lot of times with any kind of crime there's something else involved with this happening.

Another important distinction made by many participants was that statutory rape should be differentiated from other types of sex crimes. Harry (P) compared his statutory rape case, which he still asserted was consensual, to those of offenders who use force:

I mean, some people deal with it hard because I mean different sex offenders is like forceful rape to indecent exposure and some people feel that they didn't do anything to harm. It was, it's like, just people who view it as like one big harsh or heinous crime and like me, I mean, I got in trouble for sleeping with a minor but it like, I guess it was just I don't think what I done, at that time, was wrong.

In Harry's narrative he rejected the idea that statutory rape is an "authentic" sex offense. This belief does not suggest Harry lacked empathy; in another part of his interview he detailed the empathy he had learned through treatment as well as his understanding of how he had hurt the victim. Even participants who had not committed statutory rape also made the distinction. Eric (SOP), who had been convicted of rape, felt that the type of sex crime matters. When asked if sex offenders are different from other types of offenders, he stated:

It's hard to say ... some of them do it for power issues and some of them do it for intimate issues, but they both do it. I've seen them ... some of them that has children victims for power and I've seen some that's been intimate issues. As much difference that there is between the two, there's similarities between the two. To me, it's just that ... the people that have statutory rape offense, they just seem to be more about the control and the sex. It's not really an intimate thing, it's ... they want to be able to control the sex.

Some participants felt that sex offenders are different from other types of offenders. Timothy (P) did not identify himself as a sex offender and felt anyone who harmed a child was the worst kind of criminal. Timothy was convicted in the 1970s of sexual assault, but was still denying the charge. Timothy said that he felt sex offenders were different from other offenders: “Why would somebody pick up a little baby, buck naked, and kiss them on the butt? I'm not that, and I've never raped anybody in my life.” Ernest (D) felt sex offenders were both the same and different as/from general offenders. Ernest felt sex offenders were similar in that they were all law breakers, but different because of the harm done to the victim. When asked if sex offenders are different from other offenders, Ernest said:

I think we are because we do a lot more harm to our victims, but at the same time, I don't because we're all breaking the law in one way or another, and even still, I think it's really kind of funny that you can murder somebody, go to jail, do your stint, come out and be just fine, but if you sleep with your girlfriend, she's under-aged, you come out, you got to register for the rest of your life. You've got drug dealers out there who they get locked up, a lot of them, especially from my experience, they just go in, make more connections, come out, and just have products waiting for them when they go out. They're right back to it. I mean sex offenders—not all of them—there are some that are going re-offend, but there's actually some who see what they actually did, and they don't do it again.

Jason (SOP) also made the same distinctions as Ernest by stating that sex offenders are all the same “In the sense that they invaded a personal space,” but then he differentiated himself from “worse” sex offenders by noting he had only offended on one occasion as opposed to others who showed chronic sexual offending. It is important to note that Jason had been convicted of a sex offense twice, once for rape of an adult and once for molesting

his 14-year-old step-granddaughter. When discussing chronic sexual offenders, Jason discusses a recent case in the news<sup>22</sup>:

I could never do something like that. I find it both disgusting and it's going beyond animalism. To act on impulse in a brief moment, there's a difference than acting over a long period of time and continuously. Though both of them are crime, it's something different about it, something very inhumane about the way that those women was treated. Some things are impulsive, like in my case those were impulses that I didn't control. A lot of it had to do with alcohol. To just watch somebody suffer day in and day out and not do something about it, that's something wrong. I see that as a difference.

Kevin (P) was uncertain about sex offenders being different than other offenders, but he did see child molesters as the worst and had a difficult time being around them in treatment. Kevin had been convicted of statutory sodomy when he performed a clitoral piercing on a 16-year-old girl. Even though he claimed there was not sexual motive, he admitted to being "curious" enough to do it, and was sentenced to seven years in prison. Kevin did not feel that all sex offenders are "bad," but he withdrew that assessment for child molesters, because children are helpless victims:

I don't really think they're bad, I think that they need help treatment and stuff and all that. I think a child molester is worse. Like I say, I can't imagine what's going through a guy's mind to make him mess with some kids, under age kids. They can't defend themselves, a rape victim she of age, she can't protect herself neither but a child really can't defend themselves, you know what I'm saying?

Mark (SOP) also described the characteristics of sex offenders that make them different from other types of offenders. In the process, Mark also distinguished himself from the stereotypical sex offender. In his differentiation, he referred back to his treatment lessons including learning about his offending cycle, the influence of childhood trauma, and the

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<sup>22</sup> Jason is referring again to the Ariel Castro case. See <http://www.cnn.com/2013/08/01/justice/ohio-cleveland-castro-home/> for more information.

“good person making a bad choice.” While he claimed not to differentiate between offenders, he did so in his narrative:

First off, most of them have been sexually abused in some way or another so they’ve been desensitized to sexual behavior in a way. They’re ... They spend a lot more time thinking about sex than most people do and are more willing to act on their ... whatever urges they’re having. Most of them are opportunists. No, I don’t differentiate ... I try not to differentiate at all because when I was in I’ve known some really good ... I’ve met some really good people who have done some horrendous things. That doesn’t mean they’re bad people, they just made some really bad choices at any given time. That generally has something to do with how they were raised. It’s not always true, but from my experience, it’s generally true. They were seriously abused so they didn’t grow up with—and I hate to use this word—they didn’t grow up with normal experiences.

Mark also described how the perceptions of society are justified because there are horrendous sex crimes. Furthermore, he reflected upon his own crimes and minimized the harm to his victims. To do so, he compared himself to the “worst type of sex offender”:

So, in one sense it’s almost hard for society or other individuals to judge that person because they don’t know what sort of experiences they’ve had. It’s understandable too, a lot of sex offenders is against children. It’s horrible! My victims were ... all I did was put my hands on their butts. I don’t say that’s ... That’s not minimizing it, but I don’t think I seriously altered their lives by doing that. Whereas a person who’s molesting his daughter for 20 years—it has a different effect.

However, at the end of his narrative, Mark returned back to the very components of sexual deviance that led him to commit his crimes and also refers referred to himself as conforming to the sex offender status:

As far as difference from sex offenders and other offenders, I don’t even know that I can explain that. I know that it exists, that we think differently than they do, we think differently than normal people do. Our experiences and thoughts and our habits are different.

Michael (SOP) feels like sex offenders are different because of the experiences early in their life that have led up to their offending. He reflected upon his own experiences and

identified as someone who had committed a sexually deviant act, but he differentiated himself from someone who would intentionally hurt children, despite having offended against his sister and daughter over long periods of time. His identity as a sexual deviant was evidenced by his early sexualization, but he declared he was still a good person:

First of all, the media has exploited [sex offenders], and that has ... people look at sex offenders as some kind of piece of dirt, and they're nothing more than addictive people who have a problem and have grown up and chosen the wrong way to get rid of the pain, so we are looked at, and I think it's because of the ... when I say media, not just news but all the different shows that are on that portray sex offenders as these horrible, God-awful people that only are out to hurt children. I realize there are some people like that. I would say the majority of the people that I've met in group and so on and so forth are not like that.

Ultimately, sex offenders struggle with identity management after a sex offense conviction and following treatment. On one hand, most understand the image associated with the stereotypical sex offender and find that type of sex offender to be distinct from all other types. However, no participants in this sample felt they were the “worst of the worst,” including offenders whose crimes fit that stereotype. All participants felt that child molesters were the worst offenders, even sex offender persisters who were most likely to have offended against children. This distinction assisted participants in negotiating away from the vilified sex offender label, which was one they genuinely disagreed with, to normalize themselves and establish their humanity. Through this process, sex offenders could attempt an alternative identity as moral and good people.

### ***GOALS, REALITY, AND THE FUTURE***

Many scholars have suggested that the final step in the desistance process is the adoption of an alternative, prosocial identity (Giordano et al., 2002; King, 2013; Paternoster and Bushway, 2009). Envisioning such a “replacement self” is essential in the cognitive transformation process (Giordano et al., 2002). However, in this study very few participants



presented this vision of a replacement self. Rather, participants presented views of themselves that were utilized in conjunction with their sex offender label (distancing themselves as much as possible). To examine the ways in which alternative identities appeared in the narratives, participants were asked about their goals for the future in both the *Phase 1* and *Phase 2* interviews. Uncovering offenders' perceptions of their life prospects is important for understanding their ability to successfully transform themselves.

Some studies have shown that offenders have high hopes for their success in the community (Cobbina and Bender, 2012; Tewksbury and Copes, 2012). Offenders who are optimistic about the future are more successful upon their return to the community and more likely to desist (Lebel et al., 2008; Maruna, 2001; Visher and O'Connell, 2012). However, other evidence has shown that offenders sometimes think their chances are better than those around them, and that this "self-enhancement bias" is not linked with success outside of prison (Cobbina and Bender, 2012; Dhimi et al., 2006). In this study, I evaluated the life circumstances of offenders by accounting for self-reported life events (behavioral desistance) and officially recorded criminal events between 2010 and 2013 (official desistance). I also gathered information on the longer-term goals offenders had for their future. There were some differences by desistance category in the degree of optimism and the types of things they felt they would be able to accomplish. Goals for the future also seem to parallel their perspectives about their ability to be rehabilitated (see Chapter 5). The breadth and type of goals participants reported sheds light on their perceived potential to adopt alternative identities.

Desisters and emerging desisters were most likely to meet the goals they set out in *Phase 1*. Four of six desisters and two of three emerging desisters met their stated goals. For

example, Edward's (D) goal was to be off supervision, and wanted to be living in the transitional house in which he resided. He did not see himself returning to family because they were criminal influences. At the time of the *Phase 2* interview, he was residing as the house manager at the halfway house and had successfully completed his parole two years earlier. He is an example of someone who exceeded his own expectations, and he wanted to continue "doing the same things as now," which meant residing at the halfway house and living a simple life. Furthermore, consistent with Maruna's (2001) redemptive scripts, he wanted to help the other men in the halfway house transition successfully back into society, though he was the only desister to demonstrate this type of altruism. Edward's prosocial, alternative identity was related to his recovery from drug addiction and a sex offense.

Only one in the desister and emerging desister categories presented goals that offered an alternative identity with the prospect of shedding the sex offender label. Despite having returned to prison for six months, Howard (ED) had been released and returned to the residence and job he'd had prior to his revocation. In the *Phase 1* interview, he described his goals of working for the livestock center and living at his own place. At *Phase 2*, he was still working at the livestock center and was paying off debt so he could buy the trailer he was renting. His continued employment influenced his future goal of eventually owning his own cattle ranch. Importantly for Howard, learning to be a cattle rancher became a type of alternative identity he could attain, and he worked 80 hours a week to do so. The cattle rancher identity was a possible alternative because it comes with a quality of independence and anonymity. Howard had also experienced acceptance of his sex offender status by his employer and coworkers, making this alternative much more redemptive because it entailed prosocial appraisals.

However, not all desisters felt so optimistic, and this exemplified the challenges sex offenders face in adopting alternative identities. In some cases this was evidence of what Maruna and colleagues (2009) describe as a “Golem effect” where the stigma associated with being a sex offender makes one less inclined to pursue life goals (Schaefer et al., 2004). One deviant case was Donald (D). At the time of the *Phase 1* interview he was being trained in a construction program that would certify him to work with the State of Missouri on various road repair projects around the state. He was optimistic that this job opportunity would push him forward. However, after he completed supervision and was no longer in the program, he felt shunned by the employer that had promised to hire him. Donald attempted to work in other states using his road construction skills; however, he was denied the opportunity because his name was listed on the registry. In the *Phase 2* interview, he did not state many goals, and felt as if he had “lost heart.” He had no long term goals, but felt committed to helping his aging mother and father, and this was his attempt at a conventional lifestyle, though not one meaningful enough to overcome his frustration and bitterness at his circumstances. The Golem effect was not fully realized in Donald’s case since he was a desister. However, the effect was realized in Donald’s resistance to finding full-time employment. Donald presented the following analogy of his blocked opportunities:

Have you ever shopped a window of a shop and not realized what time it was and walk up to the door and they’re locking it? You know that you got the money on you right now and you know exactly which one you want? You know you can’t come by the next day because it’s Sunday, they’re closed for another day. You can’t make it Monday, so all of a sudden you show up when you can, it’s gone, that was the last one, and somebody else has got it. How many times is it going to take before you stop going to that shop? How many times can you take that heartbreak of seeing what you want, knowing that you can get it and knowing that you can obtain it and hold it in your presence for the rest of your life and maintain it and somebody else has a hold of the door shutting it? How many of those do you take before you give up?

Donald's narrative is the most negative of all offenders who felt their lives were over because of their sex offense convictions. In contrast to this case, desisters and emerging desisters had goals that were more consistent with where they were in their individual life course than with simply managing their lives as registered sex offenders, suggesting there may be hope to acquire some alternative identity. Most of these participants appeared to successfully divorce themselves from the sex offender identity when thinking of their future, but they could not shed the label's effects on how they thought of themselves.

Persisters' and sex offender persisters' abilities to meet their goals were more tenuous. In fact, no participants in these categories achieved the goals they set out in *Phase 1*, the primary reason being they had failed meet them over the three year follow-up. In *Phase 1* interviews, they discussed goals involving the achievement of independence and stability, such as maintaining their own homes and finding jobs. For example, Peter (SOP) wanted to "get a job and help my family" along with getting a car and having money to pay his bills. However, he returned to prison during the follow-up period and since his release he was still unemployed and looking for new housing. Joseph (P) wanted to have his own apartment and a steady job, and he acknowledged the challenging economy at the time of his *Phase 1* interview. By the time of the *Phase 2* interview, he was living in a tent on a friend's property and still did not have steady work. He also had pending domestic violence charges. He felt his only hope was to move out of state where there might be more opportunities for employment and where different restrictions might lead to less stigmatization.

There were differences between the persister and sex offender persister categories when examining long term goals. In general, sex offender persisters were more optimistic about their chances of success and their goals for the future than other categories were. In

*Phase 2*, persisters reported long-term goals such as securing housing and employment since they had not been as successful the first time around. However, in both *Phases 1* and *2* sex offender persisters were more likely to have enhanced optimism about meeting very specific and challenging goals (sometimes grandiose). For example, Fred (SOP), who was interviewed in the transitional facility in *Phase 1*, had hopes of living in his own place and opening his own online business (despite the restrictions on internet use). He stated, “I won’t be here [the transitional facility]. I will be working from home, selling stuff for the kitchen online.” When he was interviewed in *Phase 2*, he said he had remained at the halfway house for a long period of time and incurred a violation for failing to register. He had moved out of the facility six months earlier and was living with a girlfriend. At this time, he planned to be a manager at the Subway where he was employed and was going to attend school (another potential restriction) for a business degree. However, he was revoked for failing a polygraph.

Despite their optimism, sex offender persisters showed the greatest disconnect between their goals and the reality of their lives. For example, Raymond (SOP) wanted to be an author. He had spent much of his career prior to his sex offense conviction in radio and wanted to write an historical account of broadcasting in the Midwest. However, his parole stipulations made attaining that goal nearly impossible. Raymond was on GPS monitoring, was restricted from owning a computer, and was not allowed to go to the library (where he had been twice revoked for grooming young boys). Raymond was trying to meet his goal by writing letters and communicating with his contacts by telephone. He hoped to regain his privileges to use the library and be able to own a computer with internet access, but this was unlikely considering he had returned to prison numerous times for misusing these privileges. Raymond demonstrated a lack of understanding of how his deviant behavior had nearly

eliminated the chances of reaching his goals. Raymond's narrative was consistent with other research that has found sex offenders have difficulty being realistic about their options after conviction (Tewksbury and Copes, 2012).

In this study, hope and optimism were not linked to desistance as expected. Although desisters were more likely to meet their goals and have more realistic expectations for their future, they did not express as much optimism as sex offender persisters. Sex offender persisters felt their ability to overcome challenges (even the challenge of being in prison) was better than that of other sex offenders they knew. Moreover, sex offender persisters were also less realistic about the difficulties they might face in the community in terms of both stigma and access because of restrictions.

Sex offenders' hopes and goals were also connected with their attempts to obtain alternative identities. While not easily accessible, sex offenders negotiated their identities in ways that avoided the sex offender stereotype by differentiating themselves from the image of a child molester, likening themselves to general offenders, and asserting their conventionality, which they had obtained through treatment. Sex offender persisters demonstrated the least ability to attach themselves to alternative identities because of the severity of their offending and the etiology associated with it. The results of this analysis suggest that sex offenders, regardless of desistance category, do not have the opportunity to assume alternate identities because they are automatically assigned the stereotypical sex offender label. Despite desisters' attempts at differentiation and their success in the community, the opportunity to "be the person they were meant to be" (Maruna, 2001), was not available to them. Who sex offenders were meant to be no longer exists because they can never be "delabeled" (Hudson, 2005; Meisenhelder, 1977). Willis and colleagues (2010:554)

suggested that through the reflected appraisal of others, who see them as “authentic” sex offenders, regardless of their individual identity, sex offenders “might start to see themselves as others see them: as inherently dangerous, moral strangers who do not deserve a chance at redemption, and indeed, ought to be quarantined somewhere away from the rest of humanity.” If they are unable to fully separate themselves from the label and attach themselves to conventional identities, their ability to be rehabilitated is diminished. Hence, participants understood that they could not be conventional and a sex offender at the same time, despite their efforts to do so.

## **CHAPTER 7: DISCUSSION AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS**

The goal of this dissertation has been to uncover the nature and process of desistance for sex offenders. Sex offenders are an important population to study because their crimes are considered by the public to be more severe than any other offenders and they are subject to increased criminal justice interventions, such as residency restrictions and requirements. Research has demonstrated that these efforts have not had the desired effect on recidivism and may in fact increase the risk because sex offenders are excluded from communities, experience increased stigmatization, and lack the resources to successfully reintegrate (Matravers, 2003). Furthermore, much of the criminological and psychological literature has focused on policy effectiveness and relied on clinical samples, which has resulted in gaps in understanding of processes of recidivism and reentry for sex offenders. Recent research has focused on understanding ontogenetic explanations of sexual offending (see Lussier and Cale, 2013 for a review); however, fewer studies have focused on sociogenic explanations.

This dissertation has addressed these gaps in the literature by exploring the structural and developmental aspects of desistance for sex offenders. In particular, this study examined identity transformation for sex offenders, who rely on the cognitive scripts of condemnation and redemption as theorized by Maruna (2001). This study also explored the influence of cognitive behavioral treatment on patterns of desistance, especially in terms of the meanings of rehabilitation adopted by the participants. Lastly, this dissertation presented new cognitive scripts unique to sex offenders' identity management and transformation processes, and discussed how the scripts are reflected in their future goals.

One of the primary contributions of this study is an expanded taxonomy of sex offender desistance within the framework of the life course paradigm. Previous theorists have



dichotomized desistance outcomes (Maruna, 2001; Sampson and Laub, 1993), but this study utilized four categories along a spectrum: *Desisters*, *Emerging Desisters*, *Persisters*, and *Sex Offender Persisters*. The additional categories of emerging desister and sex offender persister highlight the unique characteristics related to the desistance process that may not be captured by official records and require more behavioral measures to identify. Emerging desisters “failed” once but then remained successful during the follow-up period, and their narratives resembled desisters’ more than those of either persister category, suggesting desisters may have unique desistance experiences. Sex offender persisters were participants whose “failures” during the follow-up period were related to triggering behaviors linked with their sexual deviance, such as viewing pornography or failing treatment.

The primary research question of this dissertation has addressed the emergence of redemption and condemnation scripts, as theorized by Maruna (2001), in a sample of sex offenders. Findings have both confirmed the applicability of the *Making Good* framework and supported an expansion of that framework that highlights the unique experiences of sex offenders. All participants in this study expressed both redemption and condemnation scripts regardless of desistance outcome. Many felt that they were “doomed to be labeled” and that their presence on the registry made them out to conform to the vilified stereotype. Desisters felt condemned by the registry because it affected employment opportunities, while sex offender persisters felt condemned by the deviant cognitions that contributed to their offending, as well as by their appearance to others as a stereotypical sex offender. Interestingly, persisters most resembled Maruna’s (2001) characterization, which includes a lack of agency over offending behavior and feeling “doomed to deviance.” However,

persisters felt control over sexual offending, but not general offending, and the label's effects contributed to their persistence.

Participants were also seeking redemption through any means available, especially treatment. Desisters expressed scripts inconsistent with Maruna's (2001) characterization in that they did not report receiving a second chance or participating in altruistic activities. Furthermore, this group expressed the most anger toward their sex offense convictions. Sadly, desisters lacked hope and optimism to move forward with their lives, and felt the circumstances that had led up to their sex offending behavior were not severe enough to justify their "life sentence." Persisters and sex offender persisters were also seeking redemption. Sex offender persisters had the least social support because of the severity of their offenses, yet they were able to find redemption through at least one person. Many sex offender persisters had offended against family members and/or felt abandoned after their conviction. Overall, participants felt redeemed through treatment in that it afforded them agency over their sexual offending (regardless of whether treatment was effective or not) and provided a community to which they belonged. Desisters were most likely to internalize and apply treatment concepts, and sex offender persisters expressed scripts consistent with ongoing processes of change.

The distinction between the cognitive processes of "changed" and "changing" was present in the language used to describe reformation. The second research question examined the roles of treatment in the lives of sex offenders, as they are required to participate. In this study, participants perceived treatment to be beneficial and all felt they had learned tools that would help them in the future, not only to remain law-abiding but also to improve their life experiences. Desisters more often expressed empathy, and studies have shown that increased

empathy is linked with reduced recidivism because it demonstrates a motivation to change (Pithers, 1999). This is consistent with offenders' own perceptions that one must be motivated in order to change deviant behavior. Many participants reported their likelihood of reoffending as "zero" and said that the tools and techniques they had learned in treatment would assist them in successfully desisting. Participants also reported on the meanings they attached to rehabilitation, such as a change in mindset, enhanced empathy, understanding of the consequences, and avoidance of high-risk situations. The primary difference between desisting and persisting was successful application of these lessons to everyday life.

The final research question explored in this dissertation has addressed sex offenders' identity management and their hope for the future. In general, participants made many efforts to assert conventionality and morality but did not have an alternative identity to adopt. Sex offenders went to great lengths to hide their crimes from the public and differentiate themselves from the stereotype. All offenders compared themselves to someone "worse" than themselves, thereby suggesting they really were good people. While some researchers have suggested these statements are evidence of cognitive distortions and minimizations, others have suggested the management of stigma is a signal of conventionality and an understanding of morality (Maruna and Mann, 2006). Regardless, participants' use of "othering" as an identity management tool was the only mechanism they had to assert their normalcy. Desisters did not have to work as hard on this differentiation, probably because they were less likely to resemble the sex offender stereotype in the first place. For them, elements of the sex offender label may not have been congruent with who they really thought themselves to be. Additionally, they may have had greater opportunities for conventional relationships that supported non-sex offender identities. Regardless of identity management

strategies, goal setting was not a part of establishing a new identity for most. Rather, participants had “stripped down” goals for the future. Most wanted to meet simple goals such as getting a job (not necessarily a meaningful one to them) and having a clean, stable residence. They also hoped for the opportunity to reestablish relationships. Despite the lack of an alternative identity and their reduced expectations, sex offender persisters were most optimistic about achieving their goals, regardless of the restrictions in place. In general, their goals were incongruous with their reality.

The findings of this study confirm the importance of treatment in offenders’ lives and the negative consequences of post-conviction stigmatization found by other studies. However, this study adds an understanding of the complexity of cognitive transformation, through a cognitive behavioral treatment lens, which is linked with sex offenders’ reimagining processes. Overall, findings support the ongoing application of desistance concepts to sex offenders because they are a distinct group, not only in terms of etiology, but also in their reentry experiences. This study associates the concept of “redeemability” with the most “inhuman” of offenders in order to present suggestions for policy and future research (Maruna and King, 2009; Waldram, 2010).

### ***POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH***

The goal of most sex offender policies is to prevent future offending (Meloy et al., 2013). However, many of these policies overlook the complex nature of offending behavior, as well as the process of re-entry after punishment. Sex offender policies tend to raise utilitarian and/or ethical concerns (Matravers, 2003). Ethical concerns include the reduction of the civil and individual rights of sex offenders. For example, the research on actuarial risk assessment tends to “over-predict” the likelihood of future offending, thereby possibly

punishing offenders who may not be high risk (Amirault and Lussier, 2011; Matravers, 2003). Utilitarian concerns focus on the “mismatch” between policy and empirical evidence (Matravers, 2003; Sample and Bray, 2006). For example, research shows the majority of sexual crimes against children occur in the home, but the focus of criminal justice and media attention has been on the “stranger danger” type of offender (Cowburn and Dominelli, 2001; Levenson, 2003; Meloy et al., 2013; Matravers, 2003). This simultaneously stigmatizes the majority of sex offenders and fails to reduce the risk for potential victims. The findings of this research seek to inform the policies directed at sex offenders and contribute to the larger body of literature aimed at correcting the mismatch between reality and policy. Ultimately, the findings of this study support numerous ways to better understand this offending population, more effectively reduce recidivism, and enhance the quality of life for victims, the community and the offender.

In this section, I first discuss the important role treatment plays in the desistance process and how current and future research can improve treatment’s function in sex offender rehabilitation. Second, I will discuss the role of the community for sex offenders and present alternative models to better utilize this source of social support. Last, I will present information consistent with current research about identifying sex offender trajectories and taxonomies, and provide suggestions for future research.

## **SEX OFFENDER TREATMENT**

Most sex offender treatment follows a cognitive behavioral model, and studies demonstrate that participation in treatment is linked with reduced recidivism. In this study, participants relied on treatment for both its risk reduction and its redemptive value. However, treatment programs tend to adopt a risk management approach, where the emphasis is on

reducing offenders' risk of committing new sexual crimes and not redemption (Andrews and Bonta, 1998; Bonta and Andrews, 2007; Lacombe, 2008). These rehabilitation models follow a risk-needs-responsivity (RNR) approach, where addressing risk is primary, followed by addressing needs, and then addressing offenders' ability to respond to both (Bonta and Andrews, 2007). Although RNR models are empirically supported, some critics suggest that they are problematic in that they take a "one size fits all" approach in sex offender treatment (Kennedy, 2001; Polashek, 2012). Treatment is viewed as a way to "rescue" future victims of sex crime, rather than as a way to rescue the sex offenders from themselves (Hudson, 2005; Garland, 2001). Alternative treatment models emphasize a strengths-based, positive psychology approach, where offenders work on rebuilding their identities as non-criminals so that they see themselves as "someone worthy of esteem and respect, and capable of more mastery and generative contribution" (Stevens, 2012:528). Findings in other studies suggest that offenders may have better chances of desisting if treatment focuses on "strengthening" them through "capacity building," as opposed to only highlighting their risk (Maruna and LeBel, 2003; Stevens, 2012). A positive psychology approach that suggests to the offender they are redeemable from as stigmatized a crime as sex offending may enhance desistance (Reeves, 2013; Wormith, Althouse, Simpson, Reitzel, Fagan and Morgan, 2007).

One strengths-based model situated in a desistance framework is the Good Lives Model (GLM; Birgden, 2004; Laws and Ward, 2002; Laws and Ward, 2011; Maruna and LeBel 2003; Ward and Fortune, 2006; Ward and Gannon, 2006; Ward and Marshall, 2004; Ward and Maruna, 2007; Ward and Stewart, 2003; Willis, Yates, Gannon, and Ward, 2013). The GLM focuses not just on criminogenic needs, but on human needs or goods, by managing risk factors through the building of individual capabilities (Ward and Stewart,

2003). The model assumes that human needs are normative and shared by all (Laws and Ward, 2011). Some of these human needs include knowledge, mastery, autonomy, and relatedness. GLM assumes that offenders are “whole” and more than a sum of their criminal histories. Part of this “whole,” or identity, is the developmental experience that may have been deleterious and may have interfered with a “coherent life plan,” which is necessary for obtaining meaning in life. Working on capabilities allows the offender to acquire human goods in a meaningful way. This model is appropriate for sex offenders because it is also assumed that crime is a method of obtaining missing human goods, like social intimacy and self-esteem. Lastly, GLM assumes that risk is reduced when offenders develop skills that secure human goods. Therefore, interventions should emphasize both risk management and the development of increased function (Laws and Ward, 2011).

GLM differs from RNR models because it emphasizes building a good life as opposed to reducing risk through only responding to criminogenic needs (Laws and Ward, 2011). GLM posits that instead of reducing the risk of reoffending by teaching sex offenders to avoid high risk situations, it is more important to understand the behavioral triggers and then modify them by building other capacities and supporting the development of identity. For example, if a child molester is abusing children because he or she has deficits in emotion management and self-esteem, it is important then to build the human goods of emotion regulation and esteem via other sources, such as employment or prosocial connections (Laws and Ward, 2011: 11). Although RNR models of sex offender treatment are most prevalent and empirically supported (Andrews et al., 1990; Dowden and Andrews, 2000; 2004), recent research promotes the use of the GLM model. Scholars supporting the RNR model suggest that strengths-based models do not have a strong theoretical foundation (Bonta and Andrews,

2003; Ogloff and Davis, 2004; Andrews, Bonta, and Wormith, 2011). Limited research on GLM has produced mixed results. In one paper, Andrews and colleagues (2011) suggested that focusing solely on obtaining human goods may actually support criminality. If one's meaning in life tends toward the criminogenic, he or she may find that deviant behavior fulfills that goal. As such, harm reduction would not be achieved. Nonetheless, some scholars have suggested that a theoretical integration of the two approaches is needed (Ward, Messler and Yates, 2007; Wormith et al., 2007).

Examining the role of treatment within a desistance framework can be especially useful. Many treatment models accept elements of the desistance paradigm, which focuses on reducing risk while enhancing individual strengths. McNeill (2006:56) said,

Unlike the earlier paradigms, the desistance paradigm forefronts processes of change rather than modes of intervention. Practice under the desistance paradigm would certainly accommodate intervention to meet needs, reduce risks and (especially) to develop and exploit strengths, but whatever these forms might be they would be subordinated to a more broadly conceived role in working out, on an individual basis, how the desistance process might best be prompted and supported.

Findings from the current study have suggested that sex offenders require assistance in rebuilding their identity. Redirecting treatment efforts to help offenders think of themselves in new ways could prove essential. Participants demonstrated through their narratives the need for strengthening their capabilities and enhancing their agency. Effectively, treatment can serve as a place to engage in this agency-building on an individual level, thereby encouraging desistance.

Although many of the human needs discussed above are components of the current treatment model in the study state, identity building is neglected (personal communication



with Provident Services, 2013).<sup>23</sup> Some have suggested that individualized treatment in the group setting will facilitate the development of shared narratives that encourage “morally agentive living” (Birgden, 2004; O’Connor as quoted in Waldram, 2010:270). Ultimately, complete redemption or reformation involves negotiation of identity through prosocial labeling (Reeves, 2013), and GLM offers this positive label. Laws and Ward (2011: 6) suggested it is improbable that treatment alone would be able to produce long-lasting impacts without an understanding that it must help offenders learn how to navigate the “social world” and “capitalize” on opportunities to better their lives. The goal of GLM is to enhance offenders’ abilities to be autonomous and make positive life decisions.

Another manner in which treatment can be improved is through a Therapeutic Jurisprudence (TJ) framework. TJ is a psycholegal approach that acknowledges the conflict between therapy and punishment philosophies. TJ argues that both RNR and GLM models ignore the mismatch between treatment and correctional goals. That is, treatment philosophies are organized around the participant (offender), while corrections philosophies focus on punishing the offender and protecting the community. TJ operates under five principles: 1) implementation of law increases, decreases or has a neutral effect on offender well-being; 2) the law can effect prosocial lifestyle change; 3) the law can rely on empirical studies to enhance offender well-being; 4) legal concerns such as autonomy and community protection should not “trump” therapeutic concerns; 5) TJ acknowledges the “overarching aims of the law” (Birgden, 2002; 2004). In this approach, TJ recognizes that the relationship between offender and counselor is breached because treatment providers uphold community protection over therapeutic gain (Glaser, 2003). Sex offender therapy is often mandated,

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<sup>23</sup> At the time of this study, one local treatment program was revising its protocol to incorporate tenets of GLM (personal communication with Provident Services, 2013).

confidentiality is not guaranteed, and counselors might impose their normative value systems on offenders (Glaser, 2003). In response to these ethical considerations, Birgden (2004) suggests that treatment be individualized in the group setting in order to consider the specific cultural values and norms of the individuals being treated. Also, the therapeutic style should be motivational as opposed to confrontational, and enhancement of capacities should be emphasized, to more closely resemble a purely therapeutic environment (Levenson et al., 2009).

Lastly, treatment can be improved by incorporating empathy within the desistance paradigm. This study produced a nuanced redemption script, related to desistance, which focused on empathy. Empathy has been highlighted by both offenders and treatment providers as essential to reducing recidivism because it breaks down cognitive distortions and provides offenders motivation to avoid reoffend reoffending (Carich et al., 2003; Colton et al., 2009; Grady and Rose, 2011; Hanson, 2003; Hildebran and Pithers, 1989; Pithers, 1999; Tierney and McCabe, 2001). Hanson (2003) has suggested that empathy consists of perspective taking and emotionally responding to and caring for others, and that the more empathy one has, the more motivated he or she is to preserve others' well-being. Within the desistance framework, empathy could be understood as social capital. In the current study, empathy was most consistently present in the narratives of desisters, suggesting that it may be essential to effective reformation. In contrast, sex offender persisters were least likely to include empathy in their narratives and focused instead on their struggles with sexual deviance, highlighting their significant background disadvantage.

Empathy is also derived from cumulative social interactions (Wellman and Wortley, 1990; Zahn-Waxler and Radke-Yarrow, 1990), and sex offender persisters had the greatest

deficits in social intimacy and opportunities for interactions with others. Despite the findings of this research, empathy has not shown a direct relationship with desistance in the sex offender literature (Hanson and Bussiere, 1998; Parton and Day, 2002). This is likely due to challenges with conceptualization of empathy and a lack of valid and reliable measures. In one study, sex offenders scored high on general empathy measures but scored lower on measures of specific empathy for their victims (Tierney and McCabe, 2001). This finding suggests that the two types of empathy are different constructs, and offenders can express global empathy (i.e. for starving children), but not empathy for the specific victim (see also Marshall, Hudson, Jones and Fernandez, 1995; Tierney and McCabe, 2001).

In addition, measurement of empathy across treatment settings suffers from validity issues (Tierney and McCabe, 2001). Pithers (1999) argues that empathy provides the motivation to work through cognitive challenges and enhance self-regulation. This type of motivation through empathy was found in desisters' narratives although not asked about directly. This finding warrants additional investigation. Pithers (1999: 263) stated,

Simply teaching abusers what they need to know to avoid relapse did not yield great benefits. Sometimes knowledge is not enough. Knowledge, in the absence of desire to use it, is meaningless. Motivation must exist to consistently employ knowledge across time and the inevitable challenges of life.

This statement is consistent with all participants' perspectives that a change in mindset is the key to meaningfully desisting. However, the actual transformational process toward this mindset requires further investigation. It appears from this sample that empathy becomes a through line in sex offenders' narrative reconstructions of their lives and future goals, but their ability to display empathy is limited due to reduced social interactions.

## COMMUNITY

Another important aspect of desistance is the offender's connection to the community (Uggen et al., 2004). In this study, sex offenders were excluded from the greater communities to which they had returned, as well as smaller communities they may have previously been part of, such as those at church or work. This exclusion was a function of their restrictions and/or due to the stigma associated with the label. Offenders described being banned from church, losing former employment, and having former community relations shun them in public. As such, most sought "alternative" communities through their sex offender treatment groups to achieve symbolic inclusion in their broader communities (Maruna, 2011). However, efforts to "be normal" seem to be contradicted by the fact that the only community sex offenders have is with other similarly stigmatized offenders. If one's only commonality with others is a criminal offense (and a stigmatized one at that), then the ability to reform his identity through reflected appraisals will be confounded.

Communities' resistance to accepting sex offenders is similarly counterproductive. General punitiveness toward sex offenders has increased over time, resulting in policies that further exclude offenders and sex offenders from the community (Matravers, 2003; McAlinden, 2007; Simon, 1998; Soothill et al., 2000). For example, United States Congress passed The Second Chance Act, which extended funding for reintegration programs for ex-offenders, but made provisions excluding sex offenders (Willis et al., 2010).<sup>24</sup> With this legislation, funds were directed toward those considered "redeemable," like drug users and mental health patients, and away from those who might be at highest risk, like sex offenders (Willis et al., 2010). Formal procedures like this reflect an unforgiving community attitude

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<sup>24</sup> Second Chance Act of 2007: Community Safety through Recidivism Prevention (HR1593/S.1060).

that sex offenders should not be afforded opportunities because they are not redeemable. As these offenders are highly stigmatized in a populist punitive climate, the reflected appraisals one who accepts them would receive from others might be equally stigmatizing. In essence, a community member may think, “If I accept a sex offender in my neighborhood, what does that say about me?”

No matter how complicated, excluding sex offenders from the community may be doing more harm than it is worth. While the motivation behind most restrictions is sound in that the overarching goal of policies is to protect children, the actual outcomes might be detrimental to successful reentry and desistance. For example, if sex offenders are restricted from returning to their homes and jobs, and experience ongoing “exile” in the contexts of their supervision and treatment, they may not have any incentive to remain law-abiding. Nonetheless, the punitive response to the sex offender marches on, without consideration of the growing body of literature that recommends more effective intervention.<sup>25</sup>

One potentially effective intervention is through current restorative justice practices. In Canada, correctional agencies have successfully implemented community level support groups known as Circles of Support and Accountability (COSAs). These groups contain community members who have volunteered and been trained in sex offender issues to be returning sex offenders’ social support group, or COSA. These have been especially useful for sex offenders who have returned to the community lacking both instrumental and

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<sup>25</sup> Willis and colleagues (2010:554) rightfully caution researchers about sensitivity to the complexity of sex offender issues: “It is vital that academics do not appear oblivious to the abhorrent nature of sexual abuse and its devastating effects on victims and the rest of the community. Rather, the aim is to convey understanding of the severe harm inflicted on innocent members of the community by sexual abuse while also appreciating that holding people accountable also entails giving them a chance at reconciliation following proportionate punishment and, if necessary, specialist treatment.”

expressive support and not fully prepared to encounter the stigmatization they will likely encounter. COSAs assist offenders in acquiring housing, finding employment, and obtaining services, and they provide a social network through which offenders can be better equipped to transform and not recidivate. COSAs are also assumed to provide the daily accountability necessary for reform. Circles are individualized to offenders' specific crimes and reentry needs. Circles also promote reform and reintegration through reintegrative shaming, which is more personal and "face-to-face" than the anonymous shaming of the general community (McAlinden, 2007:172). COSAs also achieve the restorative justice principles of taking responsibility for crime that occurs in the neighborhood and community restoration (McAlinden, 2007). Hudson (2005) has asserted that COSAs reject the othering of sex offenders by assisting them in rejecting that label and adopting a prosocial identity as modeled by the community members. Research has demonstrated that COSAs have been successful at reducing recidivism and assisting sex offenders with meaningful re-entry (Elliott and Beech, 2013; Wilson, McWhinnie, Picheca, Prinzo, and Cortoni, 2007). These types of support groups, which are situated in a strengths-based treatment model, may be better suited to assist sex offenders in shedding their deviant sexual identities and transforming into productive members of society.

The applicability of COSAs in the United States, given the current social and political climate concerning sex offenders, may be tenuous. Nonetheless, research has shown that, for general offenders, civic engagement is linked with higher self-efficacy and motivation to conform to conventional values (Uggen et al., 2004). This obvious goal is one worthy of investigation. However, if sex offenders are not afforded opportunities to be part of the community, whether because of restrictions or stigmatization, they may not make positive

transformation as easily. While some of these restrictions are imperative for community protection, and the stigma is a natural byproduct of the heinousness of some offenses, the need for an alternative, yet equally helpful, community is evident.

### **DESISTANCE TAXONOMIES**

One contribution of this research has been the identification of desistance categories using a qualitative dataset and both official and behavioral measures over a three-year period. The inclusion of behavioral measures of desistance accounts for the low base rate of sexual recidivism and allows for a more in-depth examination of dynamic factors associated with desistance. Participants in the sex offender persister category presented the most questions for additional research, as they displayed unique patterns of persisting behavior. This category was characterized by continued sexual deviance (though not official reoffending), lack of social support, and extensive background disadvantage. This group was also convinced they would not reoffend sexually and had grandiose expectations for their futures. The majority of offenders in this category had offended by abusing children (85%). Some research supports the examining differences between offenders who abuse children and those who abuse adults to make more targeted policy decisions (Edwards and Hensley, 2001; Sample and Bray, 2003). It is expected that those who have sexual attraction toward children will experience a lifelong recovery from these types of cognitive distortions, which are considered more pathological in nature. Also, the etiology of this type of offending bears unique markers that require further investigation, such as early sexualization, juvenile offending, and differences in psychopathy (Hanson and Bussiere, 1998; Hanson and Morton-Bourgon, 2005).

Some sex offender desistance research has investigated sex offenders as specialists or generalists (Lussier and Blokland, 2013; Lussier and Davies, 2011; Lussier et al., 2005; Lussier et al., 2007; Piquero et al., 2010; Soothill et al., 2010; Tewksbury and Jennings, 2010; Zimring et al., 2009). Research shows that adolescents who commit sex crimes are no more likely than adult onset offenders to recidivate sexually, but they are more likely to recidivate in other ways. Research has also shown that there are differences in persistence between types of sex crime (Craig, 2008; Furby, Weinrott, and Blackshaw, 1989; Frieberger, Marcum, Iannacchione, and Higgins 2012; Hanson and Bussiere, 1998; Lussier et al., 2005; Sample and Bray, 2006). Several studies examining actuarial predictors of recidivism have suggested that offenders with child victims should be examined separately from those with adult victims (Bartosh, Garby, Lewis and Gray, 2003; Parent, Guay, and Knight, 2012). Child molesters have an increased risk of sexual reoffending as they age, while rapists' recidivism risk decreases (Hanson, Broom and Stephenson, 2004). Craig (2008) found that, while younger rapists (18-25 years old) were more likely to reoffend than older rapists, child molesters were more likely to reoffend when in the middle age group (25 to 40 years). Taken together, sex offenders who abuse children are at greater risk for lifetime reoffending than those who abuse adults (Hanson and Bussiere, 1998; Hanson, Scott and Steffy, 1995; Hanson, Steffy and Gauthier, 1993; Harris and Hanson, 2004; Mann, Hanson, and Thornton, 2010).

The differences between those who are chronic sex offenders and those who commit a single sex offense suggest that it might be better to assign different punishments and interventions to different groups. Certainly, in this study, sex offender persisters resembled the specialists who demonstrated patterns of sexual deviance, and they require enhanced



levels of surveillance, restrictions, and treatment (i.e. they fit the stereotype). A concern raised by offenders in this study was that it is also likely sex offender specialists may be best at avoiding detection; therefore the prevention of sexual victimization is of utmost importance (Cowburn and Dominelli, 2001; Lacombe, 2008; Lussier et al., 2011). For example, the common perception of sex offenses as being perpetrated by stranger predators is a myth that masks the higher prevalence of offenses committed in the home by known offenders. Likewise, there is an emerging literature on the individuation of sex offender types (Lussier et al., 2011; Tewskbury and Jennings, 2010). The desistance categories in this study suggest there might be merit to identifying characteristics linked with certain types of sex offending, such as child molestation or the sexual assault of adults. Also, this study identified a group of persisters who struggled with general offending, and therefore might require interventions that are geared toward their general deviant patterns and that assist them in shedding the stigma of being a sex offender.

This study also assumes that sex offenders will have unique desistance processes because of their post-conviction stigmatization and restrictions. While the etiology of sexual offending behavior was an important component of the narratives, it was not a specific focus of this study. However, since offenders identified it as unique to their reasons for offending, it is important for future investigations to consider it as part of the entire offending cycle. While much desistance research has looked at events across the life course (Giordano, 2010; Maruna, 2001; Sampson and Laub 2003), there are fewer investigations of how these turning points, transitions, and other life events affect sex offenders within the desistance paradigm. Some research examining methods to investigate these events has emerged (Harris, 2013). Using a modification of life event calendars and graphics, Harris (2013) depicted the life

course events salient to sex offender recidivism, such as background disadvantage and contact with the law. The method proposed utilized an analytic strategy to compare the complex lives of sex offenders in meaningful ways and may be a useful strategy for exploring sex offender desistance patterns over long periods.

### ***LIMITATIONS***

As with all research, this study is not without limitations. First, with qualitative data, it is not appropriate to generalize results to all offender populations or the populations similar to the one under investigation, so further research is needed to determine the applicability of these results. The current study sample may not be representative of sex offenders on the whole; however, the demographic distribution of offenders in this study was representative of sex offenders in Missouri (Lombardi, 2010). The racial make-up of the current sample is 24% black, which is consistent with proportions on sex offender registries in the United States, even though this demographic is still overrepresented in the general offender population (Ackerman, Levenson, and Harris, 2012). However, there were no other ethnic groups represented in this study, and they might present differences in their perceived abilities to reintegrate (Benson, Alarid, Burton, and Cullen, 2011). Future studies should consider the proportionality of race and ethnicity in their samples.

Similarly, the lack of women in the study sample was a limitation. While *Phase 1* had three female participants, and *Phase 2* included two of them, the sample was too small to conduct meaningful analyses for this dissertation. This limited number of women is consistent with the small number of females convicted of sex offenses. Approximately 10% of the entire sex offender population is female (Bynum, 2001). Female sex offenders present their own unique experiences and challenges. For example, female offenders are more likely

to be the primary caregivers to children, and sex offender restrictions may prevent them from being such. Also, the stigma associated with being a female sex offender may present different experiences in the community in regard to opportunities for redemption. Media accounts suggest women are more likely to be “forgiven” for their sexual deviance since their crimes may align with popular sexualizations or since women are perceived as more easily demonstrating remorse than males.<sup>26</sup> It will be important for future research to consider how gender relates to the desistance process.

There are also limitations in the sampling strategy. The initial non-probability quota sampling strategy could present some selection bias. That is, those offenders who responded to the *Phase 2* request for an interview might have been different from other offenders. While bivariate analyses detected no significant differences besides age, length of imprisonment, and physical health, it is possible that there are unexplained factors that present additional bias. It is also possible that these significant differences encompass a selection of the harshest offenses, and offenses committed by younger individuals who had served less time were obscured. Future studies should consider a variety of strategies for obtaining participants. Age may be an important factor, though it was one that was not readily apparent in this study. Sex offenders are generally older when they first offend and enter the criminal justice system than general offenders, and their transitions out of crime may rely on different mechanisms than other offenders’ (Hanson and Morton-Bourgon, 2005; Lussier, Tzoumakis, Cale, and Amirault, 2010), so it is unknown how their ages might have impacted their

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<sup>26</sup> Women’s image as sex offenders is also linked with current shifts in sexuality. The most publicized offenses are by women teachers as abusers. While the media vilifies them for this betrayal of trust, there is also a tendency to downplay harm to young male victims (if the crimes are heterosexual). One female offender in this study noted that she did not perceive as much stigma related to her statutory rape of a 13-year-old boy because of this tendency. Even though the boy was a minor he was assumed by others to be somewhat culpable in the sexual acts.

decision to participate in the study. Future studies might consider comparing experiences by age groups and crime types. In addition, desisters appeared different from the onset of this study. Their self-reported life experiences, criminal histories, and sexual offending circumstances differed from the other desistance category, which suggests they may have been more likely to desist anyway. Additional research is necessary to understand the desistance categories when considering etiology and background factors related to offending that appear for those in the persister and sex offender persister category.

Involvement in treatment may also present bias and limit generalizability. Although a unique and important feature of the study, the mandated nature of treatment in the study state creates potential for interference in the genuineness of participants' statements. Treatment lessons might also bias participants to disproportionately express some of the concepts associated with desistance. It is also possible that the cumulative experiences of being a sex offender in the criminal justice system had informed participants' identities in ways that meant the current research interview was just another interview amongst the many in which they engaged. Efforts to minimize the appearance of a criminal justice agent or therapist during the interview were undertaken, but at times it was apparent that participants were "going through the motions" in describing aspects of their lives they had likely described many times. In these instances, it is possible that this type of "rehabilitative storytelling" (Maruna, 2001) may actually be related to some other form of recall bias that limits the genuineness of their stories, or they could be presenting stories that enhance their own self-image (Presser, 2004). Future research should attempt to triangulate data from participants, treatment providers and officials to develop a better understanding of the reality of the

participants' circumstances. For example, future research might explore the progression of narratives through treatment to better understand how therapeutic progress affects desistance.

Geographic location of participants might also be a limitation of this study. Sex offenders in Missouri lived in urban, suburban and rural areas, but no clear patterns emerged regarding the context of their residence. In some cases, living in a rural area provided freedom from stigmatization, but fewer resources from which to draw. Conversely, living in urban and suburban areas provided more resources, but the stigma of being a sex offender was experienced much more frequently. Future studies should consider place to determine if there are unique relationships between one's residential community and aspects of the desistance process. For example, one unique situation in this study was that in rural areas sex offender treatment groups consisted of both males and females, despite objections from treatment providers. The economic necessity to consolidate groups regardless of sex presents numerous concerns for the well-being of possible victims of abuse, as well as negotiating the potential for sexually deviant triggers.

Lastly, the definition of "desistance" also presents limitations. The study period consisted of a three-year follow-up, and while this is consistent with other studies in the larger literature on desistance, sex offenders might require a longer follow-up period (Craig, 2008; Laws and Ward, 2011). For example, child molesters have an increased risk of sexual reoffending as they age, while rapists' recidivism risk decreases over time (Hanson et al., 2004). In one study, between 10 and 31 years following their release from prison, approximately 10% of child molesters sexually recidivated (Hanson et al., 1993; also see Furby et al., 1989). Hence, the best follow-up period to capture desistance from sex offending may be at least ten years post-conviction (Furby et al., 1989).

Also, the reliance on official records for the initial distinctions of desistance may overlook the crimes that go undetected (Lussier and Cale, 2013). Therefore, measures of official desistance are limited. While the inclusion of measures of behavioral desistance sought to overcome this limitation, the nature of self-report limits its reliability as an indicator. Behavioral desistance is one way to examine the potential for sex offender recidivism since it captures unofficial, triggering behaviors (English, 1998). Future research should consider expanding this definition to incorporate the related cognitive themes found in this study.

## ***CONCLUSIONS***

The aim of this dissertation was to uncover the nature and process of desistance for sex offenders by examining cognitive transformation within the life course paradigm. The findings of this study confirm that the desistance process occurs in unique ways for sex offenders. As such, theoretical concepts describing this process for the general offender population need to be revised to address the specific characteristics associated with sex offenders' experiences. The presence of both condemnation and redemption scripts in this sample suggests that there are distinct characteristics of being a sex offender that increase the likelihood of expressing both, or either, as well as expressing them in unique ways. Findings suggest participants actively sought redemption from the stigma of the sex offender label, and the primary way it was achieved was through treatment. Treatment was a salient and positive factor in progress toward reformation. Offenders were also attempting to reimage themselves, but the only mechanism by which this occurred was through differentiation from other sex offenders. As such, there was no viable alternative identity available for this sample. This study examined these processes by including the influences of cognitive

behavioral treatment. Treatment plays an important part in building empathy, agency, and providing community, but does not assist with rebuilding one's identity. Birgden (2004: 361) has suggested, "The result of treatment should be a plan to lead a prosocial life based on a personal identity developed by the offender through narratives of self-redemption." Ultimately, treatment should enhance the concept of "redeemability" (Maruna, 2004; Maruna and King, 2009; Reeves, 2013). Unfortunately, it was clear that participants did not think it was even possible for treatment to enhance the concept of redeemability.

Scholars have recently suggested that offenders signal their desistance in many ways, such as obtaining employment or presenting other conventional behavior, but only the offenders know if they have really desisted (Bushway and Apel, 2012). Participants of this study signaled their desistance by distancing themselves from the label and asserting conventionality by any means available. The idea that offenders will signal their desistance suggests that it is important to put the rehabilitation process in their control so this signaling is more apparent and self-directed (Maruna, 2012). Results from this study demonstrate that offenders desire the transition from sex offender to non-sex offender but feel stymied by the requirements and label of their crime. Waldram (2010) has suggested that incorporating offenders' narratives in therapy can assist them in this transition from sex offender to reformed sex offender and in signaling this transition effectively to others. The challenge with signaling for sex offenders is that those on the receiving end need to hear it. Waldram (2010: 271) stated:

Viewing sexual offenders as if they are any less "moral" than everyone else—as if they have a "moral disorder"—simply "others" them, and in the process dehumanizes them, which allows therapists and others to focus on their apparent moral deficiencies rather than on their moral potentialities when approaching the issue of rehabilitation. It is my argument that focusing on cognitive distortions and eliminating the narrative context serves to disguise, misinterpret, and even eradicate

the positive, moral notions of self that most offenders exhibit in some form or another.

This study supports the investment in a strengths-based approach to treating sex offenders, because it is holistic and can affect many other arenas of offenders' lives. In fact, they shared the same sentiment in their narratives, desiring the treatment they experienced to positively impact every aspect of their lives. The goal of reducing sexual recidivism is a worthwhile one, however the very subjects of this goal have been overlooked in terms of realistically and meaningfully repairing and restoring their lives. In theorizing about the desistance process for sex offenders, Laws and Ward (2011:163) suggest that "These are not poor little lambs who have lost their way. Rather, they might be more reasonably seen as fallible, faulted human beings who have never found their way."

Desistance research with the sex offender population is a relatively new endeavor. The importance of distinguishing both ontogenetic and sociogenic processes related to offending is highlighted by numerous scholars across multiple disciplines. In addition, the available interventions for sex offenders highlight both the identification of risky behaviors and deviant cognitions, as well as the restoration of a "human" identity. Furthermore, the populist punitive climate in the United States requires additional research like this to dispel the myths that are perpetuated by media and public perceptions, which potentially heighten recidivism. Understanding how to best reintegrate sexual offenders into communities with the goal of restoring offenders, victims and communities will benefit all involved in the criminal justice process. Ongoing research of the sex offender desistance process through criminological, psychodynamic, and psycholegal perspectives will enhance our understanding of how to best achieve goals of risk reduction and successful offender re-entry.



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## APPENDIX A: Phase I Interview Guide

### **Prisoner Reentry in Missouri: Interview Protocol**

#### **Introduction**

*The purpose of this interview is to document the challenges you have faced as you move back into the community. It is important to note that these interviews will be conducted by research staff for only research purposes. **Everything that you discuss with the interviewer will be CONFIDENTIAL.** These discussions will not be available to your parole agent, the Department of Corrections, or any other law enforcement and/or regulatory agency.*

#### **Pre-Release Planning and the Immediate Release Period**

*To start, I would like for you to describe your experiences immediately after being released from prison. I would like to ask you about any pre-release programming that you may have received in prison.*

1. Can you describe the first 24 hours you were last out from prison?
  - a. How did you get to your destination? Who picked you up? How long did you stay there?
  - b. What did you do in the first few hours you were out?
2. Can you tell me some of the problems that you faced during the first 24 hours when you were released from prison? Probe: – such as where to live, money, getting around (transportation)
  - a. How did you deal with these problems?
3. Did you participate in programs to assist you in your return to the community in prison? What did this program include? How did you become involved in the program?
4. Did you complete a reentry plan while in prison? If yes, what did this plan include? Who helped you create this plan?
  - a. Do you feel that your reentry plans were helpful? How helpful? Explain
  - b. Did you understand your reentry plan? Explain
5. Did your reentry plan change upon release? How quickly? What changed?

#### **Employment**

*Next, I want to ask you some questions about your employment. Please discuss all employment experiences you have had since leaving prison*

1. **Before your incarceration**, did you have a job? \_\_\_\_\_
  - a. What type of work did you do? \_\_\_\_\_
  - b. Was this a full time job or part time? (FT/PT) \_\_\_\_\_
  - c. How long did you work at this job? (Months)\_\_\_\_\_

- d. Were you paid on payroll or were you paid cash? \_\_\_\_\_
2. Did you have a job at the time of your arrest? Yes / No
3. **Since your release**, have you been employed? Yes / No
- a. How many jobs? \_\_\_
- b. After release from prison, how long did it take to find a job?
- \_\_\_\_\_
- i. Did you have any help in finding this job (Probe: In-prison program or family member)?
4. Have you experienced discrimination or stigma as part of the employment process?
- a. **If YES**, Have potential employers expressed negative view toward ex-offenders? Have employers mentioned your specific crime?
5. **(If they are not employed)** What are you currently doing to locate a job?
- a. Why do you think finding a job has been hard? (Probe: Lack of job training? Transportation?)
6. Did you participate in any job programming while in prison? Can you please describe? Was this helpful?
- a. How could the programming be changed to better assist you ? (**If no**, do you feel this would have been helpful?)
7. Describe your current primary job?
- \_\_\_\_\_
- a. In total, how many hours per week do you work? \_\_\_
- b. What is your hourly wage? \_\_\_\_\_
- i. Is your current employment enough to cover your monthly expenses? If not, how do you plan to pay for your additional expenses?
- c. For your primary job, would you describe this as just a job or work that you are committed to?

Just a job	1	2	3	4	5	Very committed
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8. Employment Satisfaction

If they are employed:	SD	D	A	SA
a. You like the work you are doing.				
b. You <u>do not</u> get along with the people you work with.				
c. You'd be happy if you were at this job one year from now.				
d. You think this job will give you better opportunities in the future.				
e. The people you work for do not treat you fairly.				
f. Your supervisors/bosses respect you.				

g. Your co-workers respect you.				
h. Your supervisors/bosses are flexible to your schedule.				

**Housing**

*Next, I want to ask you about your housing arrangements following release from prison.*

1. Where did you live following release from prison (first week)  
 Single Family Home       Shelter  
 Supervised Facility       Multi-Unit Home (such as apartment, townhouse, etc)
2. Did the landlord conduct a background and/or credit check?
3. Did you have difficulty locating a place to live after your release?
4. Did the nature of your current offense affect your ability to find a suitable living arrangement? (Probe - Which had more of an effect, your felony background or your sex offense background?)
5. Did you live in a temporary housing facility (like a half way house) at any time following release from prison? YES/NO
  - a. **If yes**, how long was your transitional stay (please denote approximate days/months)?
  - b. Do you think your transitional stay affected your ability to find housing?
6. Please describe where you currently live. What type of place do you currently live?  
 Single Family Home       Shelter  
 Supervised Facility       Multi-Unit Home (such as apartment, townhouse, etc)

What is your current address

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- a. Have you had help locating your current housing situation? If so, from whom?
  - b. How many times have you moved prior to residing at your current address?
  - c. Would you consider your current housing arrangement temporary or permanent?
    - a. **If temporary**, where do you plan to reside once this arrangement ends?
7. Are you currently living with someone? **If yes**, what is the nature of this relationship? In your opinion, is your current neighborhood safe? Explain?
  - a. Does anyone you are currently living with have an arrest history? Who? Explain?

**Sex Offender Residency Restrictions**

*Now, I want to ask you about your certain laws that have been passed specific to sex offenders.*

1. Are you aware of the sex offender residency restriction laws? How have these laws affected your day to day life?
2. How do the laws make you feel about the law and criminal justice system? Are you more cynical because of the law? (pessimistic, less trustworthy)
3. Do you feel like you have less control over your life because of these laws?
  - a. After your release from prison, do you feel little you have the power to change things in your life?
4. Since your release have you:

	When	How Often
a. Driven past or parked near a school		
b. Loitered at a park		
c. Lived inside a restricted area		
d. Looked at pornography on the internet		
e. Lived inside the restricted area		
f. Has to live in a temporary or half way house because of the laws		

5. Are there other conditions of your parole that have affected your transition to the community?
6. Did you have to pay fines or a daily supervision fee upon release?
  - a. How much \_\_\_\_\_ (per month or year)
  - b. How has this affected your life on parole?

**Social Support (Family and Friends)**

*Now I want to ask you some questions about your family relationships (parents, aunts/uncles, siblings, cousins).*

1. Has your family been helpful in the transition back to the community?

Not at all helpful	1	2	3	4	5	Very helpful
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2. Please provide more information on the nature of support you feel from your family. Since your release from prison:

	SD	D	A	SA
Felt close to your family				
Wanted your family to be involved in your life				

Someone you could count on to listen to you when you needed to talk.				
Someone to share your most private worries and fears				
Someone to love you and make you feel wanted.				

3. How do they help? (Probe: emotional, financial, housing) please provide examples.
4. Do you think this support is important to you staying out of prison? Explain?
5. Did your family visit you while you were in prison? How often?
  - a. Did you participate in any family-centered programming while in prison or after release?
  - b. **If yes**, how helpful is this programming? How could family programming be changed to better suit your needs?
6. **(If no support)** Do you think having positive support from family would aid in your community success? Explain? If you received support, what would this support look like? (Probe: someone to talk to, financial assistance)
7. In your home life growing up have any of your family members spent time in prison?
  - a. Who? \_\_\_\_\_

Now I want to ask you some questions about your relationships with friends.

1. Have your friends been helpful in the transition back to the community?
  - a. **If yes**, think of your closest friend, how would you describe your relationship with him or her? (Probe -How long have you known him or her?).
  - b. **If no**, what was your relationship with friends like before prison? Why do you think your friends failed to support you? Think of your closest friend before prison, how long have you known him or her?
2. Please provide more information on the nature of support you feel from your friends. Since your release from prison.
- 3.

	SD	D	A	SA
Felt close to your friends				
Wanted your friends to be involved in your life				
Someone you could count on to listen to you when you needed to talk.				
Someone to share your most private worries and fears				
Someone to love you and make you feel wanted.				

4. How do they help? (Probe: emotional, financial, housing)
5. Do you think this support is important to you staying out of prison? Explain?

Not at all helpful	1	2	3	4	5	Very helpful
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6. Did your friends visit you while you were in prison? How often?
7. **(If no support)** Do you think having positive support from friends would aid in your community success? Explain? If you received support, what would this support look like? (Probe: someone to talk to, financial assistance)
8. Have any of your close friends spent time in prison?
  - a. none, few, many, most of my friends have been to prison

**Intimate Partner Relationships**

1. What is your current marital/relationship status?  
 \_\_\_Married                      \_\_\_Single                      \_\_\_Partnered    \_\_\_Divorced  
 \_\_\_Widowed                      \_\_\_Separated
  
2. Are you currently involved in a relationship?
  - a. Who is the relationship with?
  - b. How long have you been in the relationship?
  
3. **If involved in an intimate partner relationship**, please provide more information on the nature of support you feel from your current relationship. Has the support been positive or negative?

	SD	D	A	SA
a. You could turn to your partner for advice about problems.				
b. Your [partner] plays a positive role in your life.				
c. Your relationship with your [partner] plays a significant role in your life.				
d. You often need to work hard to avoid conflict with your [partner]				
e. Your [partner] makes you angry a lot.				
f. Your [partner] often tries to control or influence your life				
g. Your [partner] wants you to change a lot of things about yourself				

4. Has your partner been helpful in the transition back to the community?

Not at all helpful	1	2	3	4	5	Very helpful
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5. How do they help? (Probe: emotional, financial, housing)
6. Do you think this support is important to you staying out of prison? Explain?
7. **(If no Relationship)** Do you think having positive support from being in a relationship would aid in your community success? Explain?
  - a. If you received support, what would this support look like? (Probe: someone to talk to, financial assistance)

**Interactions with Parole Agent/Officer**

1. When was your initial orientation with your parole agent? \_\_\_\_\_  
(Exact date or number of days following release)
  - a. How did you get to your initial orientation? What did you learn or take away from your initial orientation?
  - b. Overall, how helpful has your parole officer been in making the transition back to the community?

Not at all helpful	1	2	3	4	5	Very helpful
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- c. How has your relationship with your agent changed over time? For the better or worse?
- d. Describe an experience that has been helpful/detrimental.

**Children**

1. Do you have kids? \_\_\_Yes \_\_\_\_\_No
2. If yes, how many kids do you have? \_\_\_\_\_
3. Did your kids visit you while you were in prison? \_\_\_Yes \_\_\_\_\_No
  - a. How often?
4. Do you currently live with your kids? \_\_\_Yes \_\_\_No
5. Are you court ordered to pay child support for your kids? \_\_\_Yes \_\_\_No
  - a. How much do you pay per month \_\_\_\_\_
  - b. Are you behind in your child support \_\_\_\_\_
  - c. Do you think that these costs have affected your experiences on parole?
6. **If no formal court arrangement**, are you financially responsible for your kids without being ordered by the court? \_\_\_Yes \_\_\_\_\_No \_\_\_\_\_Sometimes
7. How did your sentence as a sex offender affect your relationship with your kids?
8. Your relationship with kids in your extended family?
9. Did the sex offender residency restrictions affect your ability to live or visit your children?
  - a. Your extended family?



## **Drug Use, Mental Health, and Sex Offender Treatment**

*Now I want to ask you some questions about any drug/alcohol and mental health treatment you might have received.*

### **First, I want to ask you some questions about drug use.**

1. Do you have a history of using drugs?
  - a. Age of first use? \_\_\_\_\_
  - b. Primary drug of use? \_\_\_\_\_
2. Do you live in a neighborhood where individuals are abusing drugs or alcohol? Do you think this will affect you and your ability to not use drugs? Why or why not?
3. Are you currently enrolled in drug treatment? How long? In-patient/outpatient? How would you describe your relationship with the program staff? What is the most/least helpful part of this programming? Where is the treatment offered? How do you get to your drug treatment sessions? How often do you attend?
4. Have you been enrolled in treatment previously? How many times? If yes, do you think you will remain drug free this go around? Why or why not? How could drug treatment programming be improved?

### **Next, I want to ask you some questions about your mental and physical health**

1. Have you ever been diagnosed with a physical or mental illness? If yes, what is the illness? (PTSD, depression) \_\_\_\_\_
2. Have you ever received treatment for your illness? \_\_\_ Yes \_\_\_ No
3. Are you currently enrolled in treatment? How long? In-patient/outpatient? How would you describe your relationship with the program staff? What is the most/least helpful part of this programming? Where is the treatment offered? How do you get to your drug treatment sessions? How often do you attend?
4. Have you been enrolled in treatment previously? How many times? How could drug treatment programming be improved?

### **Finally, I want to ask you some questions about sex offender treatment**

1. Are you currently enrolled in sex offender treatment or therapy? How long? What does the treatment or therapy consist of? How would you describe your relationships with the programming providers? What is most/least helpful part of this programming? Where is the treatment/therapy offered? How do you get to your treatment or therapy sessions?

2. Did you receive sex offender treatment or therapy in prison? Have you been enrolled in treatment previously? How many times? If yes, do you think you will remain free from sexual behaviors this go around? Why or why not? How could sex offender treatment and therapy be changed to better suit your needs?

**Looking to the Future**

*Next, I am going to ask you some questions about how you see your future.*

1. Do you think you will be successful in staying out of prison? Why or why not?
2. What do feel is the most important thing in helping you stay out of prison? (i.e. employment, family support)
3. Did you have this in the past? If so, why is it different this time?
4. Where do you see yourself in one year?

	SD	D	A	SA
a. I think I will need help in dealing with my problems and challenges after I'm released from prison.				
b. I will give up friends and hangouts that got me in trouble				
c. I am tired of the problems caused by the crimes I committed.				
d. I want to get my life straightened out.				

**Criminal History/Offender Background**

*Next, I am going to ask you some questions about your background.*

1. How long have you been out of prison? \_\_\_\_\_  
 a. How long were you in prison? \_\_\_\_\_
2. Why were you in prison? \_\_\_\_\_  
 a. Was this your first time? YES/NO
3. **If no**, how many times have you been in prison?  
 a) What was the age of your first time in prison? \_\_\_\_\_
4. When on the street, were some of your friends involved in illegal activities? Explain?
5. Are you currently a member of a gang? Have you ever been involved in gang activities? Was your involvement with gangs within prison, the community, or both?
6. Since your release from prison, did you have any guns in your possession (either in your house, car, or on your person--other than your partner's guns)? Yes / No
7. How often did you carry a gun?

0	Never	2	At least once a week
1	Once or twice a month	3	Almost every day

## Prior Sexual Experiences

*It is now generally realized that most people have sexual experiences as children and while they are still growing up. Some of these are with friends and playmates, and some with relatives and family members. Some are upsetting and painful, and some are not. Try to remember the sexual experiences you had while growing up.*

1. How old were you when you had sexual intercourse for the first time? \_\_ \_\_
  - a. **If not 00**, how old was the person you had sex with the first time? \_\_\_\_\_
2. Up until the time you finished elementary school (through the 6<sup>th</sup> grade), did you ever have any of the following experiences?
  - a. Another person showing his or her sex organs to you, you showing your sex organs to another person, fondling of sexual organs, or intercourse?
  - b. If yes, what was the person's relationship to you? \_\_\_\_\_
  - c. How many times did this occur? \_\_ \_\_
  - d. Did you consider this experience to have been sexual abuse?

## APPENDIX B: Phase 2 Interview Guide

### Desistance for Offenders: Interview Protocol

#### Introduction

*The purpose of this interview is to document the changes in your life from our previous interview. It is important to note that these interviews will be conducted by research staff for only research purposes. **Everything that you discuss with the interviewer will be CONFIDENTIAL.** These discussions will not be available to your parole agent, the Department of Corrections, or any other law enforcement and/or regulatory agency.*

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#### General Overview

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Tell me about your life now (then connect timeline).

The last time we talked (synopsis of prior interview). What have the last 3 years been like?

What major life changes have happened since we last talked? What challenges have you faced?

How would you describe your quality of life?

*(If returned to prison) What events led to your return to prison?*

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#### Employment

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1. **Since the last time we talked**, have you been employed? Yes / No
  - a. How many jobs have you had? \_\_\_
  - b. How long did it take to find a job? \_\_\_\_\_
  - c. Did you have any help in finding this job (Probe: In-prison program or family member)?
  
2. **(If employed)** Describe your current primary job?  
\_\_\_\_\_
  - a. In total, how many hours per week do you work? \_\_\_
  - b. What is your hourly wage? \_\_\_\_\_
  - c. Is your current employment enough to cover your monthly expenses? If not, how do you plan to pay for your additional expenses?
  
3. Have you experienced discrimination or stigma as part of the employment process?

- a. **If YES**, Have potential employers expressed negative view toward ex-offenders? Have employers mentioned your specific crime? What did this experience make you think about yourself?
4. **(If not employed)** What are you currently doing to locate a job?
    - a. Why do you think finding a job has been hard? (Probe: Lack of job training? Transportation?)

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## Housing

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1. Please describe where you currently live. What type of place do you currently live?
 

___ Single Family Home	___ Shelter
___ Supervised Facility	___ Multi-Unit Home (such as apartment building, townhouse, duplex, etc.)
2. What is your current address
 

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  - d. Have you had help locating your current housing situation? If so, from whom?
  - e. How many times have you moved prior to residing at your current address?
  - f. \_\_\_\_\_  
Would you consider your current housing arrangement temporary or permanent?
    - a. **If temporary**, where do you plan to reside once this arrangement ends?
3. Are you currently living with someone? **If yes**, what is the nature of this relationship? In your opinion, is your current neighborhood safe? Explain?
  - b. Does anyone you are currently living with have an arrest history? Who? Explain?
4. How many times have you moved since the last time we talked to you?
 

**(If moved)** did you have difficulty finding housing because of your offense or your parole stipulations?

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## Sex Offender Residency Restrictions

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1. How have the sex offender restrictions laws affected your day to day life/activities?
2. How do the laws make you feel about the law and criminal justice system? Are you more cynical because of the law?

3. Do you feel like you have less control over your life because of these laws?
4. Do you feel like you have the power to change things?
5. How do the laws make you feel about yourself?
6. How has your status affected your self-esteem?
7. Do you think sex offenders are different than other types of offenders?
8. **(If on supervision)** Are there other conditions of your parole that have affected your life?
9. How did those conditions make you feel?

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**Social Support (Family and Friends)**

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1. Has your family been helpful in the transition back to the community?
2. Please provide more information on the nature of support you feel from your family. Since your release from prison:
3. How do they help? (Probe: emotional, financial, housing) please provide examples
4. Do you think this support is important to you staying out of prison? Explain?
5. How does your family make you feel about yourself?
6. **(If no support)** Do you think having positive support from family would aid in your community success? Explain? If you received support, what would this support look like? (Probe: someone to talk to, financial assistance)
7. Have your friends been helpful?

8. Please provide more information on the nature of support you feel from your friends. Since your release from prison.
9. How do they help? (Probe: emotional, financial, housing)
10. Do you think this support is important to you staying out of prison? Explain?
11. How do your friends make you feel about yourself?

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**Intimate Partner Relationships**

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1. What is your current marital/relationship status?  
 Married                       Single                       Partnered     Divorced  
 Widowed     Separated
2. Are you currently involved in a relationship?
  - a. Who is the relationship with?
  - b. How long have you been in the relationship?
3. Please provide more information on the nature of support you feel from your current relationship. Has the support been positive or negative?
4. Has your partner been helpful in the transition back to the community?
5. How do they help? (Probe: emotional, financial, housing)
6. Do you think this support is important to you staying out of prison? Explain?
7. **(If no Relationship)** Do you think having positive support from being in a relationship would aid in your community success? Explain? Are there barriers to having an IP relationship? What are those?
  - a. If you received support, what would this support look like? (Probe: someone to talk to, financial assistance)

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**Children**

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10. Do you have kids?  Yes                       No
11. If yes, how many kids do you have? \_\_\_\_\_

12. Do you currently live with your kids? \_\_\_\_ Yes \_\_\_\_ No

13. How did your sentence as a sex offender affect your relationship with your kids?

14. Did the sex offender residency restrictions affect your ability to live or visit your children?

a. Your extended family?

Probe: How does this make you feel about yourself?

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**Interactions with Parole Agent/Officer (if on supervision)**

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1. Overall, how helpful has your parole officer been in making the transition back to the community?

Not at all helpful	1	2	3	4	5	Very helpful
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2. How has your relationship with your agent changed over time? For the better or worse?

3. How does your officer make you feel about yourself?

4. What do you think the POs job is?

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**Drug Use, Mental Health, and Sex Offender Treatment**

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*Now I want to ask you some questions about any drug/alcohol and mental health treatment you might have received.*

**First, I want to ask you some questions about drug use.**

1. Since our last interview, have you used drugs or alcohol?

2. What role has drug use played in your life?

**Next, I want to ask you some questions about your mental and physical health**





- Is there a time in your life you felt was low?
- Is there a time you felt was a high?
7. Has anything happened to make you feel unsuccessful? What things have happened that you feel has helped you be successful?
8. How has prison changed your life?
- Have you gained anything?
- Have you lost anything?
9. Did you talk to anyone about your experience?  
If so, what was that like?
- Has anyone had a positive influence?
- Has anyone had a negative influence?
10. Would you consider yourself rehabilitated? What do you think that means?
11. What do you like about yourself? What do you wish you could change?
12. What do you think it takes for someone to not reoffend?
13. Is there anything else you would like to share about your experience?

**APPENDIX C. Participant Profile (n=29)**

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Age (at Phase 2)</b>	<b>Interview</b>	<b>Desistance Category</b>	<b>Instant Offense</b>	<b>Victim</b>	<b>Prior Sexual Offense</b>
<b>Andrew</b>	61	Prison	P	Rape	Adult Female Stranger	0
<b>Benjamin</b>	44	Prison	SOP	Child Molestation	Daughter	0
<b>Carlos</b>	38	Prison	SOP	Child Molestation	Stepdaughter	0
<b>Donald</b>	42	Community	D	Child Endangerment	Minor Female Acquaintance	0
<b>Edward</b>	54	Community	D	Statutory Rape	Minor Female Acquaintance	0
<b>Eric</b>	46	Parole	SOP	Rape	Adult Female Acquaintance	0
<b>Ernest</b>	25	Parole	D	Sexual Assault	Sister	0
<b>Fred</b>	43	Parole	SOP	Child Molestation	Male and Female Stepchildren	0
<b>Gary</b>	55	Parole	P	Rape	Adult Female Stranger	0
<b>Harry</b>	30	Prison	P	Statutory Rape	Minor Female Acquaintance	0
<b>Howard</b>	29	Community	ED	Child Molestation	Minor Female Acquaintance	0
<b>Jason</b>	63	Parole	SOP	Child Molestation	Step Granddaughter	1
<b>Joseph</b>	54	Community	P	Statutory Sodomy	Minor Female Acquaintance	0
<b>Kevin</b>	64	Prison	P	Rape	Adult Female Stranger	0
<b>Lawrence</b>	32	Parole	P	Statutory Rape	Minor Female Acquaintance	0
<b>Louis</b>	33	Community	D	Statutory Rape	Minor Female Acquaintance	0
<b>Mark</b>	59	Community	SOP	Rape and Sodomy	Minor Female Strangers	2
<b>Michael</b>	65	Community	SOP	Child Molestation	Daughter	1
<b>Nicholas</b>	73	Parole	ED	Child Molestation	Male Grandchildren	0
<b>Patrick</b>	66	Parole	SOP	Child	Minor Male	1

				Molestation	Children	
<b>Paul</b>	55	Parole	SOP	Incest and Promoting Child Pornography	Daughters	0
<b>Peter</b>	43	Community	SOP	Sexual Assault	Adult Female Stranger	1
<b>Raymond</b>	74	Parole	SOP	Child Molestation	Minor Male Acquaintances	0
<b>Ronald</b>	67	Parole	ED	Child Molestation	Granddaughter	0
<b>Samuel</b>	58	Prison	SOP	Rape	Adult Female Strangers	2
<b>Scott</b>	51	Community	D	Child Pornography	Minor Strangers	1
<b>Stanley</b>	24	Parole	D	Sexual Assault	Adult Female Acquaintance	0
<b>Terry</b>	45	Prison	SOP	Child Molestation	Daughter	1
<b>Timothy</b>	63	Prison	P	Rape	Adult Female Acquaintance	0

D=desister, ED=emerging desister, P=persister, SOP=sex offender persister

Sexual Offense Definitions (Missouri Revised Statutes, Chapter 566):

Child Endangerment: He or she with criminal negligence acts in a manner that creates a substantial risk to the life, body or health of a child less than 17 years old.

Child Molestation: A person commits the crime of child molestation in the first degree if he or she subjects another person who is less than 14 years of age to sexual contact.

Incest: A person commits the crime of incest if he marries or purports to marry or engages in sexual intercourse or deviate sexual intercourse with a person he knows to be, without regard to legitimacy: 1) His ancestor or descendant by blood or adoption; or 2) His stepchild, while the marriage creating that relationship exists; or 3) his brother or sister of the whole or half-blood; or 4) His uncle, aunt, nephew or niece of the whole blood.

Promoting Child Pornography: A person commits the crime of promoting child pornography in the first degree if such person possesses with the intent to promote or promotes child pornography of a child less than fourteen years of age or obscene material portraying what appears to be a child less than fourteen years of age.

Possession of Child Pornography: A person commits the offense of possession of child pornography if such person knowingly or recklessly possesses any child pornography of a minor less than eighteen years old or obscene material portraying what appears to be a minor less than eighteen years old.

Rape: A person commits the offense of rape in the first degree if he or she has sexual intercourse with another person who is incapacitated, incapable of consent, or lacks the capacity to consent, or by the use of forcible compulsion. Forcible compulsion includes the use of a substance administered without a victim's knowledge or consent which renders the victim physically or mentally impaired so as to be incapable of making an informed consent to sexual intercourse.

Sexual Assault: person commits the crime of sexual assault if he has sexual intercourse with another person knowing that he does so without that person's consent.

Sodomy: A person commits the offense of sodomy in the first degree if he or she has deviate sexual intercourse with another person who is incapacitated, incapable of consent, or lacks the capacity to consent, or by the use of forcible compulsion. Forcible compulsion includes the use of a substance administered without a victim's knowledge or consent which renders the victim physically or mentally impaired so as to be incapable of making an informed consent to sexual intercourse.

Statutory Rape: A person commits the crime of statutory rape in the first degree if he has sexual intercourse with another person who is less than fourteen years

Statutory Sodomy: A person commits the crime of statutory sodomy in the first degree if he has deviate sexual intercourse with another person who is less than fourteen years old.

**APPENDIX D. Logic Model: Defining Desistance (n=29)**

